

"TRUSTING GOD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 27, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

The old farmer was out driving his tractor one summer day when he rolled on to a stretch of gopher mounds. The earth gave way beneath one tire and the tractor rolled over on its side. Luckily, the farmer escaped with only a bad bruise or two. He went home and told his wife. She breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Honey...the Lord sure was with you!" Surveying his bruises, the old farmer replied,

"Well...if He was, He sure got a rough ride"

DEVELOPMENT

Abraham and Sarah whom we have been thinking about these past two Sundays certainly knew that "God was with them!" What a fortunate couple they were. After years of heartache, they were now living their last years in happiness. You'll remember that God had promised them a son, and then one day in their old age, he was born. His name was Isaac.

And how they must have enjoyed watching him grow. They sensed he was a special child. After so many years of turmoil and trouble, Abraham and Sarah could now enjoy their retirement years basking in the glow of a promise kept.

However, one day God put a call through to Abraham. "I'm right here, Lord... was is it?" responded Abraham. And God said,

"Abraham...take your son...your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering on one of those mountains that I shall show you...."

Oh, NO...Abraham must have thought. Please, God....not that!

God knew how much Abraham loved his son. And what God had commanded Abraham to do was unthinkable. It was unbelievable. No sane parent would willingly harm his or her child. An outrageous request. Maybe Abraham should go and have his hearing checked. Maybe he hadn't heard God correctly or all He had said. Isaac was the child of promise. He was Abraham's link to the future. And what about that great promise that he would father a great nation? The entire request seemed so outrageous and so unfair. Inconceivable. Unbelievable. How would he ever tell Sarah that he would offer their only son as a sacrifice.

WILLING TO ACT ON FAITH EVEN...

First-off, notice here that Abraham was willing to act on faith or in faith even when he did not understand. For me here, the bottom line is that he was a man of faith. Abraham asked no questions. He didn't try to reason or argue with God. He didn't try to strike up some kind of a deal. "I'll do this if you'll do that" type of thinking. He didn't even ask for a reason, an explanation.

Was he tempted to run in the opposite direction? One wonders. Abraham had taken matters into his own hands before, so why not do so now when his son's life was being offered up...at stake? Why not run away from God now that his link to future generations was in question?

I think that's what you and I would have done...wouldn't we?

I'm sure that God was more real to Abraham than He is to you or to me. For Abraham, deliberate disobedience was unthinkable...regardless of how absurd the request may have seemed. And so without question or reservation we see Abraham setting out for the mountains with his son, Isaac, and two servants. They would travel for three days until they arrived at the special mountain that God would guide them to. You can say this for Abraham. He took his faith seriously. It was not a casual, on again, off again, sort of faith.

I was reading recently in one of our church publications about some missionaries who were headed into a remote corner of Africa to do work among a primitive tribe. They weren't at all sure just how they would be received and so they decided to give the tribe a gift as a sign of goodwill...in advance. What they did was to fly over the area and drop by parachute a shiny new plow. This plow would help them as they farmed. At least that was the intent of the missionaries. And they were totally unprepared for what they found a few days later when they came in by land and arrived at their encampment. The natives apparently had never seen a plow before and they didn't have the foggiest idea of what this instrument was meant to do. It had dropped to them out of the sky. And not knowing what to do with the shiny plow, they had put it on a pedestal and were worshipping it.

The plow was designed to help them plow the land. It was designed for use in the fields, not something to be revered. It was designed to strike deep in the African soil. It was meant to help the people, to nourish the people, to make them healthier. It was intended to lift their quality of life, but the members of that primitive tribe didn't know that. And so this beautiful plow became for them an ornament - rather than a tool.

You know, I sometimes think that we are guilty of doing that with our faith. We make our faith into an ornament instead of a tool. Faith was no ornament to Abraham. It was the very core of his being. He might not have understood what God was commanding him to do, but he was prepared to do whatever God was asking him to do....commanding him to do. But let's move on with the stor

NOT GOD'S INTENT FOR HIM TO SACRIFICE HIS SON

Fortunately, it was never God's intent for Abraham to

sacrifice his son. We need to know this.

Every now and then we'll read about some tortured soul who ends not only his or her own life, but perhaps the life of innocent family members. It would be a tragic misunderstanding if anyone in this congregation ever took this story to mean that God would ever tell anybody to take the life of a child. You don't worship the God I worship if you could ever somehow read that into this story. God never intended for Abraham to harm this innocent child in any way and I suspect that deep down in his heart that Abraham knew that. Perhaps this is why he said to his servant,

"Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there. WE will come back to you...."

And so in silence father and son walked the final steps to the mountain. And as they approached their destination, Isaac asked his father,

"The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Abraham replied,

"God Himself will provide the lam for a burnt offering, my son...."

There was no other conversation as they slowly made their way up the mountain. A troubled father. A trusting son. Both making their way into the dim unknown. To me, that's what faith is all about.

I came across a story this past week about a man who fell off a cliff, but somehow managed to grab a tree limb on the way down. The following conversation is reported to have taken place.

"Is anyone up there?" "I am here" came back a voice. "I am the Lord. Do you believe in me?"

"Yes, Lord....I believe. Lord, I really believe, but I can't hang on here much longer..."

"That's all right, if you really believe you have nothing to worry about. I will save you. Just do as I say...."

"Yes, Lord...I will". Then the voice of the Lord, "Just let go of the branch."

A moment of pause, then, "Is there anyone else up there?"

Abraham didn't understand why God commanded him to sacrifice his son, his son, Isaac....but Abraham was a man of faith who placed his complete trust in God. And we read there in Genesis,

"When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and he laid the wood in order...."

Then he proceeded to bind Isaac and placed him on the altar. Abraham, with tears in his eyes, stood over his son with a hot coal in one hand ready to start a fire and a knife in the other. At that moment, just when Abraham was ready to kill his son, an angel of the Lord called out to him, "Abraham, Abraham". For the third time Abraham answered, "Here I am". And then the angel told him,

"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for I now know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, Isaac, your only son from me."

What a relief. God had tested Abraham and Abraham had passed the test with flying colors. At that moment of great relief, Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in the bush. The ram was sacrificed instead of Isaac. Father and son worshipped God on that mountain and Abraham named this place, "The Lord will provide" because he now knew the truth. God did provide and God would continue to provide. Abraham had placed his trust in God in a way he never had before. Abraham knew that he could depend on God in a way he never had before.

That's the kind of rugged and sturdy faith that we all need to have. With such a faith we can live our lives in confidence...trusting and building. How much do you really trust God? Are you willing to take that leap of faith?

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

It was 1958 and the first commercial jet air service began in this country with the flight of the Boeing 707. Several weeks after that first flight, a traveler on a piston engine - propeller driven DC-6 airliner struck up a conversation with a fellow passenger. The fellow passenger happened to be a Boeing engineer.

They talked. The traveler asked the Boeing engineer all about the new jet aircraft. The engineer was wildly enthusiastic about this new and much improved way to travel. He began speaking at length about the extensive testing Boeing had done on the jet engine before bringing it into commercial service. He recounted Boeing's experience with engines, from the B-17 to the B-52. And when his traveling companion asked him if he himself had yet flown on the new 707 jet airliner, the engineer replied,

"I think I'll wait until it's been in service a while".

The point is apparent. Even enthusiastic talking about our faith doesn't mean much if we aren't also willing to put our lives where our mouth is. Right?

TODAY'S QUESTION

The question then for today is: how much do you really trust God?

Abraham learned that behinds those clouds of uncertainty God awaits. And he placed his total trust in God and that trust was not misplaced. My guess is that Abraham was a different person when he came down from that mountain.

From that moment on, he realized that God would take care of his son, Isaac. From that moment on, he realized that God would provide whatever was necessary for the fulfillment of His promises. Faith. Trust. Do you really trust God. Are you willing to take that leap of faith and build your life on it? Centuries later another person of faith trusted God and won.

One of my favorite poems is entitled Gambler, by G. A. Studdert-Kennedy. It's a Good Friday poem and I've used it here across the years. Let me close with it.

"And sitting down, they watched Him there,
The soldiers did;
There, while they played with dice,
He made His sacrifice,
And died upon the Cross to rid God's world of sin.

He was a gambler, too - my Christ,
He took His life and three
It for a world redeemed.
And ere His agony was done,
Before the westering sun went down,
Crowning that day with crimson crown,
He knew that He had won."

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Crowning that day with crimson crown,
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PRAYER

Remind us, O God, in these quiet moments of what faith can do and accomplish in this world of ours and especially in our lives. Help us to risk our lives with more faith than we now have...so that like Abraham and like your son, Jesus, we too may be victors in this life. Strengthen our faith and remind us that with You all things are possible! Amen