

God-Centered Life

Genesis 22:1-14

June 28, 2020

Today's story from Genesis is one of the well-known stories in the Bible. What is the lesson we get from this story?

Some say it is about God testing Abraham's faith. Others say it is about Abraham testing God's faithfulness. We are all on the page that it is about Abraham's incredibly strong obedience and trust in God. Surely Abraham is the role model of many believers, including Moslems and Jews.

This morning I would like to share with you another view on this story.

You know Abraham and Sarah's story in Genesis. According to the 12th chapter of the book of Genesis, Abraham got a call to leave his hometown. "The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1-2)

Wow. What a call. It is a call to immigrate to a new and unknown land. A scary call. But Abram and Sarai accepted the invitation and immigrated to a new land, holding the promise in their heart, that they will be a great nation and a blessing. They lived many years and had many adventures, trusting that promise. Guess what? For a long time, the one thing that would be necessary for the fulfillment of the promise had not happened. They had no children. But as you might well know, when both Abraham and Sarah were too old to have children, God gave them a son, Isaac.

And then they immediately hung all of their hopes upon him. Right away, they sent away the other son Ishmael, whom Abraham had fathered through Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden. Everything ran around their beloved Isaac. Isaac was everything to them. No wonder. Abraham was 100 years old when he got his son, Isaac. He must have been thrilled and thought that the promise that God gave to him is about him, his name, his ambition, his faith, his son, Isaac and his descendants who would make his name great.

Then, there was a surprise visit from God. God came and required Abraham to take his son to the top of a distant mountain and to sacrifice him to give him back to God. Why, Lord? Why Isaac, Lord? Why now, Lord?

We know that God would not ask us to sacrifice our children. But the sacrifice of a child was not unknown in the religious practices of the pagan people among whom Abraham was living.

He believed that it was really something God wanted him to do and so he decided to do it. Abraham took Isaac to the place of sacrifice to give him back to God. But we know the dramatic ending part of the story. Just as Abraham was about to perform the fatal act, God intervened. God provided an animal for the sacrifice and gave Isaac back to Abraham. Abraham had proven that he would always trust God. God had proven that he would always provide.

But one question arises.

Why did God require Abraham to get Isaac back to him? Why, Isaac? Why, at this time?

I think by doing so at this time, God was trying to say to him, "Lots of important things have gone on between us, Abraham and many more will happen in times to come, but you need to understand that it is not about you and your son, Isaac, your family, your fame and your success. It is about something much bigger than yourself." And Abraham came to understand that the promise God gave him was not about him and his life and his fame and success, but it was about something much bigger, something that God was doing for all humankind. Abraham was awakened to acknowledge that Isaac was not his, but God's. He was enabled to see clearly that Isaac was no longer the one through whom his ambition would be realized and instead, he belonged to God through whom God's promise would be realized.

How do we fit into this story?

God has indeed given us everything we have. God require us to get everything back to him. Why? To give us a new gift, which is a bigger picture where we see everything belongs to God.

Picture yourself as a tiny baby just born a few days ago. We get here with nothing, naked and empty-handed. And we know we will return home with nothing when time comes. Paul reminded us of this truth, saying "for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." (1 Timothy 6:7-8) How about our time in this world? Our life span is only a minute in the history of the universe and less than a second in eternity. We are here for a very short, a very very short time. In a sense, we are no importance.

Exactly 5 years ago around this time, I was in Europe travelling alone for 30 days. Walking was a primary travelling mode to me. I wanted to look around as slowly as possible and see people and their faces closely. I walked on average more than 5 hours every day. Then, one day, out of blue sky, I found myself asking this question, "What if I would disappear here in Paris in the middle of the crowd? What happen if I would disappear like a morning fog here where no one knows me and I do not know anyone? I must have been really lonely at that time, I think.

My answer to these questions was clear, that nothing different happens. Surely I will be not here but the earth keeps turning and people eating and drinking and airplanes flying and trains running. But it was an awakening discovery moment to me. How small I am. How unimportant I am.

By the grace of God, a couple of days later, I was reminded of Jesus' saying, "you did not choose me. I chose you." His affirming voices filled my heart and gave me a sense of joy and thanksgiving. How happy and thankful I was. I was able to enjoy my solitary traveling times in Europe.

We know that even though we briefly stay here in this world and we look nothing compared to the huge universe, we are important and valuable to God and we are surrounded by God and God's love. God has provided all things we need daily. God also sends us people, including the people we call our friends, our parents, our children and our church family members and friends and help us live and love together in harmony.

Last Thursday I had lunch with Pastor Lee, one of my clergy colleagues here at the church. I asked him to come from Queens to take some time with me. His wife died about a month ago after a long painful and difficult journey. She suffered more than 20 years due to painful skin disease like Pastor Lee said Job in the Old Testament and on top of it, had cancer for her later years. I wanted to offer him some consolation and comfort. But to my surprise, he was calm and peaceful all the time with me.

"Pastor Cho, I am okay. Don't we all come to this world and return back HOME? I believe that living or dying we are in Christ. I will serve people of God as long as God grants me until I see my wife." I was moved by his firm faith in God.

He is in grief but not in despair. He does not see his story is over. He sees his story is going to go on because he believes he belongs to God and he plays a role in God's big plan.

All things belong to God, the Creator and the Sustainer. Everyone has a role in God's big plan and in God's upper story.

The things we always thought were ours do not really belong to us. We are just here for a little while. Those things really belong to God who made them. We are just the tenant who uses those things for a little while. It is our job to care for the world and to use it in the service of the purpose of God the real owner.

Family members we live together do not really belong to us. They belong to God, too. Especially our children are children of God. They are not our possessions. We are here to love and support them, so that they may play a wonderful role in God's wonderful plan for the whole creation. Each family member is a God's precious masterpiece to honor and respect.

My wife does not belong to me. She belongs to God. Your husband does not belong to you. He belongs to God. We do important things for each other, affirming that each has a call to follow and a purpose to fulfill according to God's plan.

Friends do not belong to us, either. They are not our possessions. They are not here to please us and make us happy. They, each one of them belong to God and have a role to play according to God's providential plan. We are to honor their role to play in God's world.

Yes, there is a big story that keeps going on in our personal life and in our world and that that is the story of God, the upper story. God is at work to work out God's great purpose for the whole creation and humanity and for Fairfield Grace church and for you and me.

Hosung, a member of Westchester Korean UMC. He has two sons. The first son has gone to heaven in his early age due to muscular dystrophy. The second son, Chris was a healthy child for the first 5 years and then developed the same disease like his brother did and was expected only to live up to 25 years. I had a chance to meet with him via zoom last Wed. He lives now in Kansas City. He shared a big change in his faith journey. For many years he prayed to ask God to do what he needs. Full recovery of his son, Chris was one main supplication every day for many years. But he said God did not answer his prayers. Disappointments after disappointment.

He told me more than several times last 10 years he found God intervened to heal Chris at God's perfect time. When doctors said there was no hope and gave up, God did come and raised him up again. And many, including doctors and nurses were amazed at his recovery and praised God for God's healing work for Chris.

Hosung told me, "Pastor, from now on, he stopped praying for asking God what I want and need. Instead, I have decided to give God a prayer of thanksgiving, praising and honor. No more praying to get from God, but praying to give God honor, praising and thanksgiving, because Chris is not mine, but God's and God's instrument to glorify God." How old is Chris now? Chris is now 36 years old, working as an engineer at Textron Aviation (Cessna).
Hallelujah!

Let us not forget every day that we are not the center of the universe. My prayer this morning is that we all may enjoy freely and thankfully all the things and all the people God allow us to have in our life and enjoy playing a role in the Upper Story today and tomorrow and for the rest of our lifetime. Amen. Amen.