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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH
ELKHORN, NEBRASKA
FEBRUARY 10, 2008
PASTOR MARK FRY

1 PASTOR MARK FRY: Good morning. How many Bibles?
2 How are we doing? Fantastic. We have a strong committed
3 group in this section here. We're having some fun with
4 really bringing our Bibles.

5 I was talking to Chloe. She was commending me for
6 my leather binding on my Bible and I told her how hard it was
7 when that was happening, because I didn't have this Bible for
8 six or seven weeks while it was at the Omaha Book Bindery and
9 I had to get a new Bible out and write in it and I felt like
10 a canoesman without his oar .

11 But that's part of what we want to do with you. We
12 want to help you with this important piece of literature,
13 this love story that was written thousands of years ago, and
14 we want to help you to extrapolate and interpret and to be
15 blessed then by that living word as it comes alive.

16 That's what our hope is and we want to help you with
17 that and we want to challenge you as well as support you.

18 I'm going to be looking at Genesis 22 today. On
19 Sundays we are going to be looking at different mountain top
20 stories.

21 Genesis is the first book of the Bible, and in
22 Hebrew the word Genesis is bereishit, which means in the
23 beginning.

24 It's the beginning book of the Bible and we are
25 going to be looking at Chapter 22.

1 For me it's on page 18. You might have a different
2 page that yours is numbered as, but let's look at that and
3 then I want to anchor in on that and see what the Lord might
4 have for us.

5 "After these things God tested Abraham. He said,
6 'Abraham.'

7 "And he said, 'Here I am.'

8 "He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac whom
9 you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as
10 a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I show you.'

11 "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his
12 donkey and took two of his young men with him and his son
13 Isaac.

14 "He cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out
15 and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

16 "On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the
17 place far away.

18 Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with
19 the donkey. The boy and I will go over there. We will
20 worship and then we will come back to you.'

21 "Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and
22 laid it on his son Isaac and he himself carried the fire and
23 the knife so the two of them walked on together.

24 "Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father.'

25 "And he said, 'Here I am, my son.'

1 "He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where
2 is the lamb for the burnt offering?'

3 "Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb
4 for the burnt offering, my son,' so the two of them walked on
5 together.

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

8 "He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on
9 top of the wood and then Abraham reached out his hand and
10 took the knife to kill his son.

11 "But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven
12 and said, 'Abraham, Abraham.'

13 "And he said, 'Here I am.'

14 "He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do
15 anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you
16 have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'

17 "And Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a
18 thicket by its horns.

19 "Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a
20 burnt offering instead of his son.

21 "So Abraham called the place, 'The Lord will
22 provide', as it is said to this day. 'On the mount of the
23 Lord it shall be provided.'"

24 Here ends our reading, and I'm suspicious, I'm
25 suspecting that you probably have kind of a weird feeling as

1 that story is being read.

2 We went to a movie last Saturday. The movie is
3 called "There Will Be Blood" and it's one of those movies, at
4 the very beginning of that movie, I didn't know what the
5 movie was going to be about, but the music behind the sound
6 track is dark and ominous and you have this notion that at
7 any moment a shoe is going to drop.

8 It has this tenseness to it, and that's kind of the
9 way this story is.

10 It's dark. It's like I wonder what is going to
11 happen.

12 What I want to do is I want to unpack that for you
13 and I want to probe that emotion that the story brings,
14 because it's curious story, but we need to understand the
15 context of this incredible test.

16 It says in those first three words, after these
17 things God tested Abraham.

18 What things? Lets figure out what things we're
19 talking about.

20 The story of Abraham has been told from Chapters 11
21 through 21.

22 It's a very long story, it's a very interesting
23 story.

24 There are these wonderful pearls of truth in the
25 story up to this point.

1 And so when it says after these things God tested
2 Abraham we need to look at some of those things and so I have
3 made as list of those.

4 The scattering and the confusion of the earth's
5 languages is one of those things.

6 The Tower of Babel has been built and God confused
7 their language and scattered the people all over the place
8 and then that's when Abraham arrives on the scene in Genesis
9 11 and 12.

10 And Abraham, he's chosen by God, and that's the
11 second thing, he goes without knowing.

12 He's given this promise and he leaves everything
13 behind.

14 He responds to God in this faithful way and he goes
15 without knowing what that means.

16 I've chosen you, Abraham, so he goes without
17 knowing.

18 He's blessed beyond measure. We see that he's
19 incredibly wealthy.

20 He has silver and gold and camels and donkeys and
21 sheep.

22 He is blessed beyond measure and as a response to
23 what has been happening to him in those two chapters he
24 decides that he's going to give a tenth of everything back to
25 God.

1 This is where the tithe originates. Abraham gives
2 us that gift.

3 And you can see it for yourself in your Bible at
4 Chapter 14, Verse 20.

5 "So Abraham gave God one-tenth of everything." It
6 came right off the top.

7 Then what we see as Abraham's story continues to
8 unfold, we see that that covenantal relationship is signified
9 by circumcision.

10 Literally God commands Abraham in the 15th and 16th
11 Chapter, your people need to look different, my people need
12 to look different, so each male son is circumcised as a sign
13 that they are part of this covenantal relationship of
14 tithing, of giving back to God, of keeping good on that
15 promise, just as God has made this promise to Abraham that
16 you're going to be as numerous as the stars in heaven.

17 What we see next is an interesting story of how
18 people were being totally disobedient to that promise in
19 Sodom and Gomorrah.

20 Abraham bargains with God, surely if I can find
21 fifty people, will you not destroy them?

22 He said sure.

23 How about 45? How about 40? How about 30? How
24 about 5?

25 He can't find anyone that is staying true to that

1 covenantal relationship, so Sodom and Gomorrah happens and
2 Lot's wife is turned to a pillar of salt.

3 And so what we are seeing in this is we're seeing a
4 loving God, but we're also seeing a God that you don't mess
5 around with or you will be turned into a pillar of salt, so
6 there is this dialogue of that.

7 There is Sarah's barrenness. He meets this
8 wonderful woman Sarai, as it's pronounced.

9 They are given this promise that your child is going
10 to bless the whole world, and Sarah can't have a children.

11 And so it's eight or nine or ten chapters of
12 frustration of being barren, and some of us know what that
13 feels like, it's that amazingness of that.

14 And finally they get new names in the midst of that,
15 Abram becomes Abraham, and Sarai becomes Sarah, and finally
16 Abraham and Sarah have a child in the 21st Chapter.

17 And they name that child Isaac, which in Hebrew
18 means he laughs, because it sounds like an amazing joke.

19 You are going to bless me when I'm in my 80s with a
20 child?

21 And God makes good on that promise, so that is all
22 of the different places where Abraham has been.

23 So when it says after these things, that's a laundry
24 list of the things that have been happening to him.

25 The importance of tithing; the promise; the

1 importance of circumcision; a covenantal relationship.

2 God wants us to have literally skin in the game, you
3 see. Grace. Response.

4 And so after that journey, in the midst of that
5 journey, now we see this incredible demand, God testing
6 Abraham, and that's where we find ourselves.

7 We had wonderful a Christmas gift last Christmas, a
8 "Walking The Bible" DVD series, and I have a little snippet
9 of that. It has a beautiful piece about this Abraham story.

10 It's about four and a half minutes, but you'll love
11 this.

12 This is Bruce Feiler who wrote the book entitled
13 "Abraham" and this is him walking the Bible.

14 (Excerpt Played)

15 That's great, isn't it? Quite the place. A crag of
16 rock where Abraham is given this amazing demand.

17 I have interpreted this story a lot of different
18 ways through time, and I keep a lot of my old sermons and
19 it's interesting to see the different ways God is working
20 with me and teaching me.

21 A little over a year and a half ago I preached on
22 this text and I learned a really cool thing about how God
23 creates all things new.

24 And that's the great thing of the Bible, isn't it?
25 It changes in due season, but I remember preaching a sermon

1 on maybe Abraham was supposed to argue with God.

2 Maybe that's what God was doing, is he was testing
3 him to see if he would bargain with him like he had done at
4 Sodom and Gomorrah.

5 One of the points that I made from that message was
6 that it's not okay to sacrifice our kids. God doesn't want
7 that. I still believe that's true.

8 But one of the new things that I'm learning, and as
9 I said, the Book of Revelation says behold, I'm making all
10 things new, God's word is a living word.

11 As I pressed into this story now differently now in
12 a different season, it's interesting to me that as I read
13 this text, we need to ponder the question, what is God
14 teaching us through this story?

15 And here is the amazing thing for me as I read
16 through these 14 verses, how come Abraham is not surprised by
17 the demand?

18 What is God teaching us and why are Abraham and even
19 Isaac not surprised by this audacious demand of God.

20 Three thousand years later there is this oh-oh
21 character to the story.

22 But if you look closely at the way Abraham responds,
23 he's not surprised, but all of us are.

24 Isn't that interesting? And Isaac is not either.
25 It's take your son and offer him as a sacrifice. Okay. And

1 off he goes and climbs the mountain.

2 He doesn't seem to have the same tenseness as the
3 audience when we read this.

4 We know it's a test. Does Abraham know it's a test?
5 And here is where I go with that.

6 I start to think to myself, why do I feel like that?
7 Why do I have that notion of, well, surely God won't test him
8 in that way.

9 But what we learn from looking back at Abraham's
10 story is that he wants skin in the game, and he also wants
11 our hearts to be circumcised, so that we aren't surprised
12 when God makes demands of us.

13 And I believe that's possible. Not only do I
14 believe it's possible, I think it really is what this text
15 calls us to do.

16 What would I do? Would I go up the mountain
17 begrudgingly?

18 Would I trust that God will provide? That's what I
19 want.

20 And God is a God not to be messed with, but God is
21 also a God who does demand sacrifice.

22 And I don't know what form that's going to take. I
23 don't think it's going to be me needing to murder my
24 children.

25 But what we've done is we've watered down the whole

1 notion of sacrifice so much that we have kind of taken that
2 off God's plate, and I see it in our economy it right now.

3 We are kind of in a pruning time in our nation's
4 economy, and instead of asking people to make sacrifices,
5 what the world would have us do is refinance.

6 Isn't that interesting?

7 But, you see, sacrifice is an important thing, it's
8 a discipline, and as Wenda prophetically said on Wednesday
9 night, repentance is not an emotion; it's a decision.

10 It's actually deciding to climb. It's deciding to
11 make good on the promise that God has made to us and to put
12 one foot in front of the other at times with great fear.

13 But, you see, that's really what the angel says. I
14 see that you fear God, and I think we need to have a little
15 bit of fear of God, and Abraham's story teaches that, Lot's
16 wife turned into a pillar of salt, that's pretty brutal.

17 But God is not just a warm quilt. God is also a
18 fire by night, and so there is some beauty in that.

19 There is a great theologian, he's getting very
20 elderly now, his name is Klaus Westermann, and he identifies
21 through history four periods of sacrifice.

22 The first period is human sacrifice. We still see
23 this in some of the very primitive tribes throughout the
24 world.

25 They will sacrifice people. You will see it in

1 South America in the history of the Andes, the natives down
2 in there.

3 The second period of sacrifice was then animal
4 sacrifice.

5 This is where Abraham's story comes into play. He's
6 going to offer up a ram, or a lamb, as a sacrifice to appease
7 an angry God.

8 And then historically we see the sacrifice of Jesus
9 as God's only son, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of
10 the world, on our behalf.

11 What Westermann is keenly identifying in this cusp
12 of history in which we now live is that there is a lot of
13 ways we've returned back to that first human sacrifice stage.

14 And he's not identifying that as, well, you know, we
15 are supposed to sacrifice our children.

16 What he's identifying is there is a cultural
17 intensity now that a lot of companies are sacrificing their
18 very workers' lives for the benefit of the cause.

19 And he's saying that this is the first time in
20 history that has been as identifiable as it is right now.

21 And that's kind of a scary thought, isn't it, that
22 human sacrifice is now being demanded by organizations, and
23 you have to prove that this is your god, and you have to be
24 willing to die for it.

25 And it might not be spoken, but that's what is

1 happening in a lot of different ways in our world right now,
2 which is rather frightening.

3 And my question for you is really, dare we to swim
4 against that tide?

5 I think we are called to.

6 Are we called to not sacrifice ourselves, but are we
7 called to make sacrifices?

8 I think so, because as we learn from Abraham's
9 footsteps up this mountain, he's not being dragged, he's
10 making a decision that God will provide, and he's sealed it
11 with blood, and he's indelibly written it on our hearts in
12 the cross.

13 And what Abraham then is is this great role model,
14 this is the way we can follow a God who makes commands, and
15 also gives demands, he will be faithful, he will provide, and
16 whenever the test gets too great, he says we will provide for
17 you a way out. That's an incredible gift of grace.

18 In the film they did mention about the similarity of
19 the Abraham and Isaac and the story of God with Jesus, how
20 God laid the wood on his own son so that we don't have to,
21 and how that sacrifice is the lamb of God that takes away the
22 sin of the world for God.

23 But that's the question. I would just ask you to
24 pray on that a little bit.

25 Why do we get so surprised on this story and how

1 would God help me take away some of that surprise and replace
2 it with faithful steps, acknowledging with a full awareness
3 that God will provide. It's not going to be so bad if we
4 listen and believe.

5 Some conclusions. God prods and God provides for
6 us. God names us and claims us. God challenges as well as
7 supports us.

8 If you are like me, maybe you have failed once or
9 twice as a parent, or as a child.

10 I will share with you, it's the twenty year
11 anniversary of my father's death, and so many times I've
12 failed as a son, and so many times I've failed as a parent,
13 so many times I've failed as a husband, so many times I've
14 failed as a pastor.

15 And so if you are anything like me, you have failed
16 many times.

17 But, you see, this is the other thing that I believe
18 that Abraham teaches us.

19 If you have been faithless, at least be accountable
20 and admit, Lord, I've slipped a few times.

21 I've not gone willingly up the different mountains
22 that have been ahead of me.

23 There have been some of those times when you have
24 literally needed to grab me by the ear and drag me, and for
25 those times I apologize.

1 I want to do better. I want to do better, Lord, and
2 the way I want to do better, I want you to have me choose
3 people that will hold me accountable so that I don't have to
4 keep failing and falling and fleeing in a different
5 direction.

6 Lord, I want to follow you, and your path leads to a
7 cross, and thank you, Lord, that I most likely won't be
8 crucified, because you were for me.

9 I think it's a fun story. Pastor Wenda, has
10 anything come to you?

11 The story is very penetrating. I love it, but it
12 does elicit a set of emotions that I think we really need to
13 ask God what it is.

14 PASTOR WENDA FRY: The thing I was thinking about as
15 you were teaching us today and preaching is that sometimes we
16 are surprised when we are tested.

17 We are going along and we think, why did that
18 happen, or what is happening to me now?

19 And that's what Abraham teaches us, is that out of
20 with his covenant relationship with God he was prepared. He
21 was simply prepared.

22 Why aren't we surprised that he resisted God? We
23 are surprised because we often resist God, I think.

24 After all these things God said Abraham go, and he
25 goes, and he goes through and goes through that test with

1 such faith.

2 I did funeral for Steve Heiman last Monday and I
3 told the people that had gathered for that that I had been
4 stuck in First Peter for about six weeks, and different
5 sections of First Peter have been speaking to me and helping
6 me in my pastoral ministry.

7 And today as Mark was speaking, I'm now in the last
8 section of First Peter, Chapter 5, and it says keep a cool
9 head, stay alert, the devil is poised to pounce and would
10 like nothing better than to catch you napping.

11 I like that. That's true, isn't it? Keep your
12 guard up.

13 You are not the only ones plunged into these hard
14 times. It's the same with Christians all over the world.
15 Keep a firm grip on the faith. The suffering won't last
16 forever.

17 It won't be long before this generous God who has
18 great plans for us in Christ will have you put together and
19 on your feet for good because he gets the last word. Yes, he
20 does.

21 So I'm thinking that maybe God wants us to be girded
22 this week, prepared for the tests that are going to come,
23 because sometimes things are going along okay and then we are
24 hit blind-sided.

25 I know Mary Ellen Heiman, she lost her mother and

1 husband within the course of five weeks.

2 And on the day of her husband's funeral her older
3 brother went into the hospital.

4 And just a couple days ago her younger brother went
5 into the hospital.

6 She feels blind-sided. I know she does. But she
7 said, "I'm going to keep the faith, Wenda."

8 I'm thinking that today there are those, I've asked
9 the maestro to play "Behold the Lamb of God" because we love
10 that song and it reminds us that there was one who was caught
11 not in the thicket but on the cross for us, caught up in our
12 salvation.

13 We have such a beautiful display for Lent this
14 season, don't we?

15 I'm thinking that perhaps you would like to come
16 forward to receive some strength.

17 I would like to pray for you, for those tests that
18 are going to come this week, and just gather under the
19 strength of the cross of Christ and I will ask for a blessing
20 and a provision for your life this week, because scripture
21 says we have got to keep a cool head, and we've got not to be
22 caught napping, because for sure we are going to have a test
23 of our faith this week, just like Abraham.

24 I'll have maestro play that as you come and I'll
25 pray for you, pray for all of us as we prepare to be tested

1 and investigated this week.

2 We need that strength, we need the armor of God.
3 That one Lenten hymn, "Beneath the Cross of Jesus I Long to
4 Take a Stand", this is where we get our strength, is
5 underneath the cross of Christ.

6 Lord, as we look to the cross of Calvary we see the
7 old wood and we are reminded that you provided a ram caught
8 in the thicket for Abraham's test.

9 And you provided the lamb of God for our test, and
10 we praise you, for you are a holy God. You are mighty in
11 love, wonder, and deed.

12 Jesus, we need strength this week to endure the
13 tests that will come.

14 Help us to keep a cool head, for we know that the
15 devil is poised, ready to assault our faith, to tell us that
16 we don't really believe, that Jesus really won't be there for
17 us.

18 We say get behind us, Satan, for we know that Jesus
19 endured the tests in the wildness with you and said no to
20 every test he gave you, and said that he would worship the
21 Lord his God, and that's what we would do, Lord.

22 Thank you for the strength that comes from the
23 shadow of the abiding cross.

24 Thank you for the love that we share here with the
25 Bethany family, for the way you are working your power into

1 our lives so we will not be caught napping, but we will be
2 ready. Thank you, Jesus, and all of God's disciples said
3 amen.

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