

Message: God Shows True Faith=Radical Love**The Costly Call¹**

“Compared to the average citizen of Bangladesh, Abul was quite blessed. Each morning he left his comfortable three-bedroom flat, got into his plush four-door sedan, and drove downtown to a beautifully decorated office. Abul was accustomed to having the finer things in life, including influence as a politician to make decisions that affected millions in Dhaka. He treated his wife, Rosnita, as his first lady. She decorated their home with fine linens and draperies and shopped only in places patronized by the upper level of society. Her housekeeper bought the groceries and prepared the meals for the family.

Life was good in Abul’s world, but things were about to change. He was about to exchange marks of success for marks on his back.

Although the constitution of Bangladesh promises freedom of religion, cases of government persecution of non-Islamic faiths are well documented and increasing in intensity. While serving in a local governmental position in Bangladesh, Abul watched as a Bengali man, Abraham, was sentenced to death. Abraham had denounced Islam and accepted Christ as his Savior, a crime worthy of execution according to Islamic laws in that country.

Intrigued by the man’s humility and love for Christ, Abul visited Abraham in his prison cell two days prior to his execution. Steadfast in his newfound faith, Abraham refused to recant his beliefs and continued to be at peace about his approaching death. Abul asked him, “Why do you not simply denounce this Jesus Christ?”

Abraham’s reply shocked him: “I cannot denounce Christ because He would never denounce me.” Concerned for Abraham, Abul again urged him, “Believe what you will, but say that Christ is not God. Save your life!” In a meek, low whisper Abraham replied, “I would not commit a lie against any man. I can never commit a lie against the Son of God who gave His life for me. He gave His life for me. I count it joy to die for Him.”

¹ <http://www.cbn.com/entertainment/Books/CostlyCall.aspx>

Abul wept as Abraham shared his faith with him. Two days later the council gave Abraham one more chance to renounce Christ, but he refused. For his defiance, he was scourged with chains; one of the chains ultimately wrapped around his head, crushing his skull. Abraham never fought back. Instead, he prayed to Jesus, asking for the strength to persevere. He seemed not even to feel the pain. He was at total peace. Watching in utter amazement, Abul knew at that very moment that he must seek out this Christ that Abraham knew.”

Faith is having the confidence to place our trust in God and obey, even when we are called to do strange and difficult things, even to the point of denying our mortal life as martyrs of faith. Abul did come to faith after the experience he had with this Bengali Christian, but at great cost. This story is one of many recorded in the book Costly Call by Emir Fethi Caner and H. Edward Pruitt.

Today’s Scripture reading, Genesis 22:1-14, is a very famous story. God intended the story to be well-known, not because we say, “whew, Abraham dodged the bullet that time.” Abraham is lifted up as an example for us to emulate and follow. It’s not often that pastors preach on the Old Testament, partly because a lot of background is needed to help us understand the culture of the time. The other reason is we like stories about Jesus’ love. It’s easier to preach love than fear God in today’s culture. That doesn’t diminish or minimize the fact that we should fear God, but it helps us to understand fear of God from a different perspective. Rather than fear being a concern about God’s wrath, fear is due to the awe and reverence we have for the God of the universe, the Creator who made us, revealed himself to us as told in the Bible, and who loves us in ways so deep and radical we can’t easily imagine.

Abraham and Isaac’s trip to Mt. Moriah gives us a glimpse at how radical God’s love is. Abraham’s life is filled with travel and this trip is the pinnacle. It is helpful to look at Abraham’s life to set the stage for this three-day mountain hike. I will just touch on a few of the highlights, but I believe you’ll see a pattern pretty quickly.

Abraham was living in Haran when he was called by God at the age of 40. God calls Abram and promises him the land of Canaan in Gen. 12. At age 75, Abram takes his wife Sarai and extended family and the household goes to Canaan, a move of more than 300 miles. In Gen. 13, when they get to Canaan there is famine, so God sends them to Egypt for safety. After a series of odd adventures, Abram defeats some kings in battle, refuses the spoils and offers 10% of his goods to Melchizedek, High Priest of the Most High God. God promises Abram an heir in Gen 15 and shows him a night sky full of stars, representing his descendents. When Abram was 86, Sarai gives her slave girl Hagar to Abram because she is frustrated she can’t have children (Gen 16). Abram makes the mistake of listening and so a baby boy is born, creating a source of tension and conflict. The angel of God intercedes, Abram names the child Ishmael and he is raised by the family. At age 99, God gives Abram the rite of circumcision and all men who are members of the household begin following that practice, which exists today (Gen. 17). God also gives Sarai and Abram new names, Sarah and Abraham. In less than a year, Abraham offers hospitality to three visitors, who turn out to be heavenly beings, sent to warn about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even better, they tell Abraham and Sarah they will have a child in less than a year (Gen 18). When Abraham is 100 and Sarah 91, Isaac is born (Gen 19). Ten to thirty years pass, which leads us to Genesis 22:1-14, our reading for today.

Have you ever felt like your life is a journey, filled with highs and lows, joys and concerns, times when you did the right thing and times when you did wrong? While none of us are likely to enjoy parenthood at the age of 91 and 100, we can all think of times when we clearly felt God’s presence, no matter whether we were in our room, under a tree or in the desert. Faith does not depend on emotion; faith comes from confidence, trust and obedience in God, even when our feelings are scattered.

Looking over the life of Abraham and Sarah, there are a couple of things we can observe. First, Abraham and Sarah weren’t young when Isaac was born. In fact, they were decades past the time when anyone would expect them to have children. The blessing of Isaac, their only child together, is a gift from God, there is no other explanation. They must

have cared for him more than anything else in the world; after all, they expelled Ishmael when they caught him mistreating Isaac. Second, Sarah and Abraham made mistakes, but they never lost their faith or their awe and reverence for God – their fear of God. God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, and they lived through famine, war and many other challenges. There was no doubt in their mind God was in control. God was a priority in their lives, no matter how strange God’s requests might seem or how unlikely God’s promise seemed. Abraham and Sarah had faith. Their faith was based on their confidence that God meets his promises. Because they were confident in God, they trusted God in all things. Confidence and trust in God are seen in their behavior, in the way they obey God. The Bible tells us about Abraham’s faith, but Sarah was his wife, the one closest to him for more than a hundred years. There is no doubt in my mind her faith was strong, too.

All of this brings us to an early morning almost 3,500 years ago. Abraham got up early to complete his packing for the trip. Two young men, most likely servants, were accompanying him on his trip with Isaac to a mountain God showed him. They were going to make a sacrifice to God, so they packed wood, a knife, firestarter and camping gear and set out on what turned out to be a three day hike. Abram saddled the donkey so he could ride. At his advanced age, hiking rough terrain really wasn’t an option.

Now Abraham knew what he was setting out to do. God told him, *“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”* Abraham didn’t talk about it. We don’t know if he told Sarah, though I would bet he didn’t. Can you imagine him getting up early to pack and then saying to Sarah, “See you in a couple of days, honey. I’m going to take Isaac up in the mountains and offer him as a sacrifice to God.” Sarah did die a few years later, but hearing that news might have sped up the process! There is no doubt in my mind that Abraham was emotional, but he kept it under control because he was confident; he trusted God.

Abraham’s obedience is an act of confession to God. By obeying God, even when God’s command was strange and difficult, Abraham

demonstrated God was most important in his life. He didn’t want to lose the son he wanted for so long, but he would if God required it. God wants us to have this same perspective about everything in our life. Our children, families, relationships, health, money and all that we have are ours, but they are on loan from God. When we deny God anything he asks for, we are acting as if it is ours, through our own efforts. We cut God out of our picture, which only serves to reduce us as we lose our fear – our awe and reverence of God, and our gratitude for the blessings he gives, even in the middle of the harshest trials.

Before we come to the climactic scene, let me take a brief moment to talk about Isaac’s role in this drama. Scripture tells us that Isaac was young. Perhaps he was a young boy, as many depictions show. Keep in mind that men weren’t viewed as mature until the age of 35 in Jewish culture. Given the long lives of their ancestors, young could certainly imply that Isaac was in his late teens or even twenties. Sarah died when she was 127 and Isaac was born when she was 91, so an image of Isaac in his twenties is not unlikely. If that’s the case, then v8 is given more meaning, *“the two of them walked on together.”* Amos 3:3 says this, *“Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?”* This implies Isaac was most likely a willing participant. At some point in the trip – perhaps assisting his aged father up the mountain while carrying wood on his back, Isaac understood he was to be the sacrifice and yet he did not run away, which would have been easy. It is a great blessing when a parent and child are of the same mind in serving God.

Once they arrived at the spot, the altar was built, Isaac bound and placed on top of the wood. The tinder was lit and Abraham stretched out his hand to take the knife to sacrifice Isaac. That’s so difficult to imagine! No one in this room has been called by God to take this specific action toward their child. However, everyone in this room has been called to take whatever is dearest and most precious to them and to offer it to God in some way. No matter whether that is showing a child tough love, letting go of a parent, or giving up our desire to control a spouse, our response to the will of God is a clear reflection of whether we fear God or not. We are all constantly tested in this regard. While we may not know what tests God has for us, be assured that we can trust that what he

has planned is good, not bad, even if we can't see it. Keep this in mind: God sees from the beginning to the end of all things, while we can only see the past and present.

My favorite part of this whole story is when the *'angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" "Here I am." "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."* The relief and gratitude Abraham must have felt! I have to imagine tears flowed as he untied Isaac and helped him down off the altar. And God certainly knew Abraham's heart as God provided a lamb. A sacrifice to God was made that day on the mountain top with love and gratitude in Abraham's heart.

God provided another Lamb on a hill top outside the city of Jerusalem when he sent his son to be the sacrifice for our sins. Abraham's faith, great as it is, is the faith of a human. By the divine faith of Christ, his obedience to the father and love for us, we are saved. We don't have to travel to the Middle East and hike up Mt. Moriah. God provides for us wherever we go to him in prayer. All we have to do is ask God in faith, believe his promise and wait to see how he will provide. God's faith in us is radical. Otherwise, why would he have sent his Son as the Lamb who washes us clean from all sins, redeeming us by his blood?

The angel calls again in vv15-18, reaffirming Abraham's faith and reinstating the covenant. The angel reaffirms the reason for the blessing: Abraham's faith is an example of what God values in humanity, our desire to be in relationship with God. The angel's call also serves as a reminder: the Lord's favor should never be taken for granted. In love, God reaffirms his commitment to those who obey him, and in love the same God withholds his commitment from those who disobey until they learn to obey. God didn't just test Abraham's faith, he showed Abraham how radical and deep faith needs to be to be in a fully committed relationship with God. God calls us to the same radical faith each day.

I pray you will not hold anything back in your relationship with God. Go to God with a confident faith, trust him and obey when he calls. God will provide even if the path is strange or difficult. Love God by faith.

Genesis 22:1-14 (NRSV)

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Romans 6:12-23 (NRSV)

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.