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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

First Sunday in Lent (Series B)

February 22, 2015

Text: Mark 1:9–15

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

God said what? That can't be true. Sounds more like the devil or insanity than God. But that's what God said, "Take you 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 of which I shall tell you" (Gen. 22:2). The Bible doesn't tell us what Abraham said to Sarah, his wife and Isaac's mother, on the morning he left for the land of Moriah. Maybe he didn't say anything, just going on a short father-son trip. Be back in a few days.

Jewish and Christian thinkers and theologians have struggled for millennia with God's demand that Isaac be sacrificed. Genesis 22 is one of those chapters in the Bible that leaves you stumped, confused, maybe angry or embarrassed. God couldn't have been serious. It must have been just a fable, a curious story coming out of a primitive culture. Oh yes. God was quite serious in His demand. The son must be sacrificed. The rest of the Bible, including the New Testament, takes these events to be real history. Genesis 22 is no parable, no myth.

The Bible introduces us to Abraham in Genesis 11. The Lord called Abraham, or Abram as he was named at that time, to leave his country and family and go to a promised land. That request, in itself, was pretty remarkable. But Abram and his family, servants, cattle, and all their possessions were loaded up and taken to the west, to the area of Palestine.

And then the Lord promised to give Abraham a son even though he and Sarah, his wife, were childless and decades past the age of raising children. Through Abraham's son all the nations of the earth would be blessed. That was the promise given. And Abraham believed God and that faith – that God would do the impossible – was credited to him as righteousness before God (Gen. 15:6).

Angelic visitors met with Abraham and Sarah. They told him that Sarah would conceive and give birth to a son; they even said his son was to be named Isaac. Sarah,

who was in her nineties, laughed at all this. “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” (Gen. 18:12). Sure enough. Nine months later. Isaac is born, the beloved son of promise. God remained faithful to Abraham. Everything, up to this point, has that fairytale like quality. And they lived happily ever after.

Until Genesis 22. “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 of which I shall tell you.” Why go through all the fuss of calling Abraham to leave his country and promise him that he’d have a son – even though that’s a biological miracle at this point in their lives – only to demand that the promised son be sacrificed?

Through the visitation of angels, the Lord promised another Son to a couple. This time, the couple of was young, certainly younger than Abraham and Sarah. This miracle was even more spectacular because the mother-to-be was a virgin. She and her soon-to-be-husband were still engaged, preparing for their wedding. They had not experienced sexual relations with each. Her Child was conceived of the Holy Spirit.

But they do marry. And their Son is born. It was quite a trying ordeal for they had to journey to Bethlehem right at the end of her pregnancy. But the Child did come. He was visited by shepherds and then later by Magi from the east. He was named, Jesus. The angel said He would do what His name means: save His people from their sins.

This Jesus grows to manhood, learns carpentry from His step-father, Joseph. And then, one day, the heavens are ripped open and Jesus stands in the Jordan River to be baptized by His rather wild and eccentric cousin, John. The Holy Spirit descends upon Him and a voice from heaven says, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (vs. 11).

And then, shockingly, the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus, now drives Jesus into the Judean wilderness to be tempted by Satan for 40 days. Things were so bad, that Mark highlights the fact that the wild animals were there with Jesus. And angles granted Him assistance.

Why do through all the fuss of sending your Son from heaven only to place Him square in the way of danger, death, and suffering?

The stories of Isaac and Jesus' births are beautiful and glorious. God went through a lot to see that both were born.

But why does God demand they be put in harm's way? For as you know, Jesus would go to Calvary's cross – at the Father's command – but there would be no sacrificial ram to save Him as there had been for Isaac.

The only Biblical answer to the question as to why must God's Son be placed in danger's path is that sin, Satan, death and the grave, can only be defeated by the suffering death and resurrection of the God's Son. Isaac's miracle life and near-sacrifice at Moriah were but a blueprint for the real battle began to be fought immediately after the Lord's baptism. God the Father did provide a lamb for sacrifice: His Son, the Lord Jesus.

Such a message isn't always easy to hear or to say. The spiritual realities that exist in this world are frightening. People just don't want to hear that real sin exists, with real devils, and real evils. There is a spiritual war that everyone is engaged in. Most recently, it was exemplified in the martyrdom of 21 Coptic Christians last Sunday on the shore of Libya.

The sermon concludes with a proclamation of God's love being the motivation for the risk He took to save the world.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.