

WHY CAN'T I BELIEVE IN GOD?
January 3, 2016 –Genesis 22: 1-14
The Church of the Covenant

“Why can’t I believe in God?”, was a question posed to me many years ago by a man in a former congregation. When people become more comfortable with you as a pastor sometimes they will express reservations they have about Christianity with you. It takes a high degree of trust to say to a pastor –“Look, I have some problems with Christianity...and with belief.” You have to know that I won’t judge you negatively, nor hear it for anything other than what it truly is –an honest, heart-felt question. Questioning is not bad. Doubt leads to faith in my observation. Expressed doubt is often the prelude to spiritual breakthrough. But it takes trust. This man’s problem was precisely focused on the Bible story from Genesis I just read to you –the story of God asking Abraham to take Isaac, his son, to an altar and to sacrifice him. The man said: “I cannot believe in a God who would ask a Father to do what I as a Father could never do with my own son...to take his life and sacrifice him to God.” And so it engaged me with an ongoing discussion with this man, who while he attended church most Sundays and participated in many ways in that church, nevertheless had a hard time claiming he was a Christian. So what would you say to someone who came up to you and shared what this man shared with me????

First, I would take them out for coffee. I have kept various coffee places in business personally and financially over the years. There are many good places here in Washington for great ongoing conversations. A relaxed non-church setting is good. Then also understand you are not there to “fix” their belief but rather to enter into a great ongoing conversation. I am not there to convince someone; I am there to open doors and thoughts that I would believe are inspired by God and then to allow the Lord to be at work in the heart of someone. I can’t argue anyone into the Kingdom of God or convince someone of something that they are otherwise disinclined to be convinced of. It’s a conversation with a friend, not a debate. Its fun, not painful. Its interesting. In the bargain you become friends and get to know one another better. You appreciate them; they appreciate you. A lot of my ministry is conducted over coffee.

So what would you say to this man? Next, I think I would agree with him. I also cannot imagine being asked by God to sacrifice anyone, let alone my only son. You can look at this story as a story of a harsh, judgmental, brutish, bloodthirsty God. IF, IF, IF, you don’t understand that the story is not about actually sacrificing Isaac, because in the end God provides another way where Abraham does not have to sacrifice Isaac. Right? Abraham sacrifices a ram caught in a thicket, not Isaac –that’s the story. And indeed I have read that this on its simplest level is a story contrasting the Lord God Almighty of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who DOES NOT REQUIRE child sacrifice, with the heathen cultures all around, who DO REQUIRE child sacrifice to Molech. So the text itself and the context of the story point to the fact that our God is a God who does not require child sacrifice while the heathens always do. Great conversation then ensued...How much of our modern secular and heathen culture unfortunately sacrifices our children in so many ways. More great conversation ensues...

But then he said, “How cruel God is to require Abraham to go through all the motions and then stop him from doing what he thought he had to do at the last second.” In his mind, same cruel God he had trouble believing in. I pointed out that I felt the story was more about Abraham’s calm faith in the middle of taking Isaac to that altar. The place was on Mount Moriah. Mount Moriah is the center of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, where the tabernacle was placed by David, and the temples constructed first by King Solomon and then by King Herod. The Holy of Holies was directly over Mount Moriah, the very place where this story of Abraham’s consummate faith was played out and the very place where it

was believed that God literally dwelt on earth. The worship of God in ancient Israel occurred on the very spot of Abraham's faith. So Abraham patiently *"split the wood for the burnt offering"* (Genesis 22: 3). Says, when he sees the place of the burnt offering, *"I will go yonder and worship"* (worship meaning potentially sacrificing his son Isaac). (v. 4) He ties his son to the altar, where he has previously placed the wood and takes the knife in his hand. His son, Isaac, asks *"Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"* (Genesis 22: 7) To which Abraham calmly responds: *"My son, God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering."* (v. 8) How could Abraham have been so calm? How could he have been so faithful? How could Abraham wait upon the Lord in this way? Why didn't he run screaming away from the altar in the opposite direction? Why didn't he say to God –"I don't want to serve let alone believe in a God who would ask me to do this to my only son!!!!!" Why?

--Because God had made a unilateral covenant and promise to Abraham and Sarah. He promises: *"Sarah your wife will have a son."* (Genesis 22: 10) God then adds: *"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"* (v. 14) God has made a unilateral, unconditional promise and covenant to Abraham –He will be the Father of many nations. His descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the heavens or the grains of sand by the sea. We are children of Abraham, by adoption through the Lord Jesus Christ, we are Abraham's offspring. But the promise of God could not be kept if Isaac were killed on an altar. And that's what Abraham knew. God is faithful. God keeps His promises. His covenants with us are inviolable and unbreakable. The world may change but God's covenants never change. Gibraltar may crumble, the heavens may tumble, the world may stumble, but God remains the same and He is the great keeper of promises and covenants. What is true today was true yesterday. What is true yesterday is true forever. Abraham knew that God would keep His promise and that somehow Isaac would live. God makes the same kind of covenantal promise to your child in baptism. *"Lo, I am with you always"* promises the Lord Jesus Christ. Can you trust in the Lord God Almighty to watch over your child? Yes you can! This is a story, not of a cruel and vengeful God who demands we sacrifice our children to Him; this is a story of how we can trust God with our children, because God is ever faithful and God has made an unshakable, unbreakable covenant with them through baptism. More great conversation ensues with the man from my former church who doubts...

So back to the story of Abraham and Isaac –so Abraham is literally poised with the knife over the heart of his only son, the heir of the promise, the sign of God's covenant with him, and an Angel of the Lord intervenes. *"Abraham, Abraham"* the Angel of the Lord calls out. *"Do not lay your hand on the lad...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."* (Genesis 22: 11-12) And then God shows Abraham a male ram caught in a thicket. This male sheep is the perfect sacrifice, not Isaac. And Abraham called the place *"Jehovah Jireh"*, meaning *"the Lord will provide"*. (v. 14) Because when we place our full faith and trust in the Lord, as Abraham did, our faith is reckoned as righteousness, and the Lord provides for us in our life.

Then I say to the man who doubts, "You see, that male sheep, that ram, is the prefigured Christ." The ram is the sign that a male child will be the one sufficient and perfect sacrifice acceptable to God. Jesus is the One who is the substitutionary blood atonement for the sins of the world. Calvary and the cross are the altar where another only begotten son will be sacrificed. One son sacrificed so another need not be sacrificed. There in the Holy of Holies on Mount Moriah, the Lamb of God who was slain, enters with His precious blood and pays the one, all-sufficient sacrifice for us, to wipe away our sin, under the new covenant in His blood. Jesus dies that Isaac need not die. Jesus dies to fulfill the covenant and promise to Abraham and Sarah. The male ram is sacrificed on the cross that we might live.

And then the man who doubted sputtered and said, “But, but HOW could God do that to His only begotten Son? The One whom He loved more than all else? And to that I simply paralleled the Angel’s statement –Now I know you fear God, because you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And I said to the man –“And now you know that God absolutely LOVES YOU because He has not withheld His Son, His only Son, from YOU!”

The man responded: “Stu, I think you’re trying to make me a Christian!” And I said: “Friend, I cannot make you a Christian. But God can.” Isaac poignantly asked of Abraham –“*Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*” Answer: Calvary, Isaac...it is on Calvary...Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*