

February 18, 2024 – Genesis 22:1-18

A few days ago, a tragedy occurred that hit quite literally close to home. A shooting in downtown Kansas City that killed one woman and injured 22 more, many of them children. A shooting that occurred in the midst of a celebration. A time for joy and local pride, filled with families who just wanted to see their heroes. Some of those families were from our own community. It hit very close to home.

And it only seemed to get worse as information came in about what motivated this horrific crime. For it wasn't the psychotic actions of a madman. It wasn't the terrorism of a religious or political group. No, it was simply the foolishness of teenagers. Arguing over some stupid personal disagreement. Little more than a temper tantrum by children. And yet so many people were hurt and killed.

It's at times like this that we can't help but look at the world and say, "Something is terribly wrong here." Children are not supposed to be coldblooded killers. Super Bowl victory rallies are not supposed to be places of suffering. This world shouldn't be a place of fear. But it is.

You know, less than two weeks ago, I participated in Calvary Lutheran High School's Witness Workshop. And at these workshops, we are assigned characters that we are supposed to role play. So that the high school kids can get experience sharing their faith with different types of people.

The character I was assigned to role play was someone who couldn't believe in a loving God because there was just too much suffering in the world. And it's tragedies like the one in Kansas City that create those very people. As if the crime, disease, war, and death that pervades our world wasn't enough already. There are a lot of people who look around them and say, "Something is terribly wrong here." And decide to blame all of it on the absence of a loving God.

It's a reaction that you might think Abraham would have been justified in having in our Old Testament lesson today. Because, in this lesson, Abraham is tasked with not just experiencing a tragedy, but actually taking part in it. Becoming an instrument of suffering. And all because God commanded him to do so. To do something that any rational person would look at and say, "Something is terribly wrong here."

It begins with God's initial demand, *"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."* It's almost as if God is trying to make this request sound extra cruel. Take your SON. Your ONLY son. The son you LOVE. And go kill him. Go make him a BURNT offering.

And, truthfully, if this were any other Canaanite god, this kind of demand really wouldn't have been surprising. Child sacrifice was a pretty common part of Canaanite religion. They would have looked at this request and shrugged.

Because this is just what gods do. They're cruel. They don't care about us. They don't care about the promises they've made. They don't care about the lives they destroy. We are insignificant to them. They do what they want.

Which is honestly not that much different than the character I played for the Witness Workshop. "If there's a God, he doesn't care about humanity. We're insignificant to him. He's obviously cruel and unloving and not at all trustworthy. If he exists at all... which he probably doesn't."

But Abraham knew better. He knew that the God he worshipped was different than other Gods. He knew that he was a God who keeps his promises. After all, he had already promised to bring Abraham into a good land and had done just that by leading him into Canaan. He also knew that he was a God of life, not death. For he had given Abraham and Sarah a son even in their old age.

It must have been confusing. Something is terribly wrong here. But Abraham obeyed anyway. God had been faithful to him. He would be faithful to God. That was their covenant. *"So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him."*

For three days they travel. Isaac and the servants believing this was a fairly normal trip to worship the Lord on a mountaintop. Nothing too unusual about that. Not at least until they get closer. And they begin to realize that something is terribly wrong here.

First, it's the servants who are told to stay behind while Abraham and Isaac go further up the mountain. Then it's Isaac who realizes for the first time that they didn't bring a lamb for this sacrifice. Where is this sacrifice going to come from?

Abraham's response to both reveal nothing out of the ordinary. He tells the servants, *"I and the boy will go over there and worship and come back again to you."* We will come back to you. Both of us. Likewise, he tells Isaac, *"God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."*

Now, it's easy to assume that Abraham was just trying to avoid a very uncomfortable discussion with his servants and son. Lying to them so that they aren't horrified by what he plans to do. But God's Word gives us a much better answer than that.

Hebrews 11 tells us that as Abraham took his son up the mountain, he was full prepared to kill his son and offer him as a burnt offering. However, he was also full expecting that after he had done so, God would raise his son from the dead. Why would he have this expectation? Well, because of what God had already revealed about himself. He is faithful to his promises and he gives life, not death.

God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation through Isaac. Not through Ishmael, the son of his concubine. Not through any other son that Sarah might give birth to. Isaac and Isaac alone. And so Abraham believed that promise, even if it meant resurrecting Isaac from a pile ashes on an altar. From the very dust of the earth.

As it turned out, Isaac wasn't sacrificed on that altar. We hear all the way back in verse 1 that this was all a test, from the very beginning. God never had any intention of letting Abraham kill Isaac. And, ultimately, what Abraham told Isaac came true. God did provide for himself a sacrifice.

But the sacrifice that God provided wasn't just a ram caught in a thicket for Abraham's burnt offering. No, it was a much greater sacrifice. The sacrifice of God's own Son. A sacrifice he made because there is something terribly wrong here.

There's something terribly wrong with this whole world. There's something terribly wrong with not just the hearts of those young men who shot all those people in Kansas City, but with your heart and my heart too. For, as James tells us, we are each tempted. We are each lured and enticed by our own desires. And when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.

And, had God done nothing, that death would have been our own. We would be tempted. We would sin. And we would die. And there would be no one to blame but ourselves. And none of it would be terribly wrong because it would be exactly what we deserved.

But God, in his great love, has done something truly unthinkable. Something that, if it weren't so beneficial for us, we might call "terrible." He has provided for himself a sacrifice of his own son. His beloved son, with whom he is well please. His son, who was tempted by the devil himself, and yet remained sinless, so that he could be the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Your sin and mine.

And now, like Abraham, we cling by faith to a God who keeps his promises and brings life from death. There is something terribly wrong here, but God will make it right. He will resurrect us from the ashes of this fallen world and the very dust of the earth. He will be faithful to his covenant of love with us, even though we are not always faithful to him. For he has given us life and life in abundance. Life in this life. Life in the next life. Life in the resurrection, forevermore.

And that is exactly what I encouraged the high schoolers of the Witness Workshop to focus on. Not just because it's a good way of witnessing to others. But because I knew there was a good chance that one of them might reach that point someday. Where they looked around at this sinful world and said, "There is something terribly wrong here." And their faith might waver.

We do have a loving God. And he does not abandon us to this wretched world and all its suffering and death. For just as he did not abandon his Son to the grave, but resurrected him on the third day, so also he resurrects us on the last day. So believe in the God who keeps his promises. He has provided the sacrifice that you may live. Amen.