

February 28, 2018 – Genesis 22:1-8, Hebrews 11:17-19, John 11:17-27

Why is heaven up? Have you ever thought about that? Why do we always visualize heaven as being up? Above our heads. In the clouds. For most people, heaven is up, hell is down, and earth is in between.

And yet, we know perfectly well that it isn't. Not really. Heaven is not in the sky. It is not in outer space. It is not up. It's in its own realm. A spiritual realm that has no physical relationship with this earth. So why do we always say that is heaven up?

Well, it actually comes from the Bible itself. It's all over scripture, really. There's lots of references to God being above us in the heavens.

And it's a concept that's reinforced through the use of mountains. Because in addition to being big and impressive and beautiful and even a little dangerous, mountains were always used as a place of worship. A place where you went to be closer to heaven. Closer to God.

A place where sacrifices were made and their smoke ascended straight to the throne of God. In the Bible, heaven is “up.” And prior to the invention of the airplane, mountains were the furthestest “up” that we could get on earth.

So it makes sense that when God delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, it was on top of a mountain. And when the Israelites built their first altars to the Lord in the promised land, they were on top of mountains.

And it's no surprise that some of Jesus' most important moments were on top of mountains. The Sermon on the Mount. The Transfiguration. The Ascension. Mountains are places of sacrifice and worship. Places where God's people came closer to him. And He came closer to them.

We hear about one of those mountains in our Old Testament Lesson today: Mount Moriah. God tells Abraham, *“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 kind of a horrible, gruesome thing to ask, isn't it? I mean, throughout the Old Testament, one of things that sets the God of Israel apart from the other gods of Egypt and Canaan and Babylon is that He never, ever demands human sacrifices. The whole sacrificial system is set up under the premise that God accepts the blood of animals so that they don't have to sacrifice themselves and their children.

But Abraham doesn't know that. Remember, this is before the Law of Moses. This is before the Tabernacle and Temple. This is at the very beginning of God's covenant with His people. Abraham is still learning about this God that has called him to Canaan and promised to make him a great nation. And so it's not quite so crazy to Abraham that this God might demand a human sacrifice.

But it still must have seemed kind of odd to him. After all, God had told Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation through Isaac. Through this boy who he's just now told Abraham to kill. How would God possibly fulfill that promise if Isaac is dead?

No matter how you slice it, God was demanding an enormous sacrifice from Abraham. The sacrifice of his beloved son. The sacrifice of God's miraculous gift in their old age. And, on the surface, the sacrifice of God's covenant with Abraham.

The burden of obedience on Abraham must have been absolutely crushing. And many of us are tempted to read this story and say, “How dare God ask that of Abraham? How dare he test Abraham like that? How dare he even suggest that Abraham murder his son and offer him up as a sacrifice?” I know that's my gut reaction. God's not allowed to demand that much from someone.

Or is He? Doesn't the God who made us, who gives us life and breath, who gives us our daily bread, doesn't He have the right ask anything of us? Doesn't the God who miraculously gave Abraham that son, who offered a covenant with Abraham as a gift, who led Abraham safely to a prosperous home in Canaan, doesn't He have the right to take back anything He wants? Doesn't the God who has tolerated our sinfulness and disobedience and rebellion and total depravity, doesn't He have the right to demand everything from us? Even that which we love most?

You see, our horror and anger and bewilderment at this test is actually a reflection of our sinfulness. It's a reflection of our self-righteousness and arrogance. That we would presume for one split-second to tell the almighty God what He is and is not allowed to do.

And yet, we do that every day of our lives. Every day we see horrible things happen around us and we say, "God, why did you let that happen." Every day the world seems to make less and less sense, and we say, "God why don't you fix this?" But that's not for me to decide. That's not for me to judge.

No, instead, the faithful response is the response of Abraham. Our Epistle Lesson tells us that when Abraham was faced with the prospect of sacrificing his own son, he didn't question God. He didn't demand an explanation. He didn't doubt God's promise to make him a great nation.

No, Abraham turned to God's faithfulness. He turned to the Gospel. He turned to the power of God to save. And he said, "Even if I do kill him, God will raise Isaac back from the dead."

Because the solution to a world of sinfulness and death isn't in our perfect obedience. It's certainly not in our pride and arrogance. No, the solution to sin and death is a God who forgives sin and raises the dead.

And so many centuries later, another Father would take his only Son, whom He loved, up on top of a mountain. He would lay the wood for the sacrifice upon His Son's shoulders. And as the nails pierced His hands and feet and side, His disciples would look on and discover that God had provided for Himself the lamb for the offering.

For God had sacrificed his only beloved Son, that whoever believes in Him might not perish, but have eternal life. God showed us that His Law is indeed crushing. And that His expectations for obedience are beyond our reach.

But His love for us is so great that He would do something horrible. Gruesome. Unthinkable. And sacrifice His only Son. For our redemption.

Sacrifice His only Son so that we might know that God does not seek the death of sinners, but that they turn from their sins and live. Sacrifice His only Son so that we might know that whoever believes in Him, though he die, yet shall he live.

On the mountain of Moriah, Abraham sought to make an offering of perfect obedience that would reach heaven. But God turned his hand away at the last moment. Not just to spare Abraham the agony of killing his son, and Isaac the agony of being killed. But because it wouldn't have been enough. That one act of obedience wouldn't have taken away either Abraham's sin or Isaac's.

No, it was on the mountain of Zion - the mountain of Calvary – that God the Father an offering of perfect obedience through His Son. And it really did reach heaven. For one moment, that mountain became the highest point on the planet. Because it bridged heaven and earth. And gave us access to the throne of God itself.

Why is heaven up? Because our Lord was raised up on that cross. That all should look up and believe and have eternal life. The Israelites believed heaven was up because it was so far away. So far above our heads. But through the sacrifice of Jesus, heaven isn't nearly so far away. For He has climbed the mountain. The Lamb of God has been slain on the altar. And He has brought heaven to earth. Amen.