

## **SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON**

### **First Sunday in Lent**

**February 21, 2021**

**Psalm 25:1–10 (ESV); Psalm 25:14 (ESV):**

1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, in you I trust;

let me not be put to shame;

let not my enemies exult over me.

3 Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;

they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

4 Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all the day long.

6 Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

7 Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

8 Good and upright is the LORD;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

9 He leads the humble in what is right,

and teaches the humble his way.

10 All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,

for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

14 The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,

and he makes known to them his covenant.

## **First Reading: Genesis 22:1–18 (ESV):**

### **The Sacrifice of Isaac**

22 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 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 of which I shall tell you.” 3 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. 4 On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” 8 Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

9 When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 12 He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven 16 and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring

shall possess the gate of his enemies, 18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

**EPISTLE: James 1:12–18 (ESV):**

12 Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. 13 Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

16 Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

**THE GOSPEL - Mark 1:9–15 (ESV):**

**The Baptism of Jesus**

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

**The Temptation of Jesus**

12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

**Jesus Begins His Ministry**

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

**Sermon 8 – First Sunday of Lent**  
**“Binding Abraham's Trust”**

**Genesis 22:1-18**

Dear friends,

This week's Old Testament lesson is the binding of Isaac from Genesis, and in it we see just how seriously God takes both His commands and His promises. We also see just how seriously God's people should take these things. God does not issue commands for His entertainment, and He does not promise us things to renege, or trick us. His promises should reassure us, they should co-opt our fear, get ahead of our anxieties or our frustrations, but they often don't, because they seem so fragile sometimes, and you see that here. This story could be confusing, I've heard confusion on it before, so what is it about? This story is about substitution, and it is about trust, and you and I have things to learn on both those scores.

Isaac is a miracle. I want you to remember that. This boy has no right to exist. He was born of the union of a hundred year old man and a ninety year old woman. More than that, this woman was not only long, long past the age where childbearing makes sense or is safe, but she was barren all her life as well. Isaac should not be, yet God tells Sarah's body to get with the program and warm up to its purpose, and it does, because God has that power. Isaac exists because and only because of God's promise to Abraham, that a child from his own body will be the heir of his household, and the heir of the promise that God had made to Abraham. Everything depends on Isaac. Remember that Abraham's entire relationship with God is based on two promises that God made Abraham, you'll have a son, that son will begin a bloodline, and that bloodline will inherit the land of Canaan. Everything God has told Abraham, the whole of God's relationship with this man, depends on Isaac staying alive long enough to begin his own family.

That is what makes this deliberate and very puzzling to Christian ears. God seems to change His mind, and even Abraham seems to get the idea that more is going on here

than meets the eye. **“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 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 of which I shall tell you.”** The whole “hey, burn your kid” thing seems to come out of nowhere, but child sacrifice was done in the region. We don't know how universal it was, but this isn't quite out of left field as it seems. I remind you that based on the book of Genesis so far, God has told Abraham very little about who He is and what He expects. He's learned about circumcision, God has given Abraham the promise of the land and Isaac, but that's it. The book of Genesis says that this is a test, it says so explicitly, and I guess the question that lingers in the mind is whether Abraham knew it or not. The book of Hebrews seems to think that Abraham had faith that even if he did kill Isaac, God would be able to raise Isaac from the dead to keep His promise. That is the Word of God as well, so we will take that as the word on the subject. Abraham either knows there's more to this than meets the eye, or Abraham figures that the God who has promised him, basically, that he'll be able to help raise Isaac's grandchildren will be able to work things out. Look at what it says in verses 4 and 5: **“4 On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”** Abraham tells the servants that they're both coming back. I don't think he does this out of discretion or shame, I think he does it as literally as its presented. Abraham thinks that Isaac is coming back home with him.

Why am I telling you all this? Because this is a remarkable demonstration of trust. It all hinges on Isaac. Everything God has told Abraham depends on Isaac staying alive. Without Isaac, there is no bloodline, more to the point God promises that Isaac would be the one to inherit these promises from Abraham. Further, Abraham loves his miracle boy. They didn't do fatherhood and fatherly love in quite the same way we do now, but Abraham loves him, and this is something that God repeatedly tells Abraham. Why? I

think this is deliberate. Abraham doesn't need to be told that he loves his own son, he knows that. You love this boy, Abraham. You love me, Abraham. How much do you trust me, Abraham? Do you trust me with that which you love most? More to the point, do you trust *my words and my promises* with that which you love most? That is what at stake here. Not just Abraham's generic trust in God, but Abraham specifically trusting what God specifically told him. Isaac's gonna grow up, he's gonna start a family, that family will be your legacy, and that bloodline will inherit this land. There's enough wiggle room here to make this agony for Abraham. Has God changed His mind? What's God going to do? But regardless, the command stands. Sacrifice your boy. Sacrifice the son I promised you.

This isn't cruelty. In our sin we like to unfairly label God's tests as cruel, but that's what they are, tests. They are there to stretch the muscles of our faith, most often by stretching the muscles of our trust. Sin means that whenever God exercises His authority over us in any way, He's being unfair, He's being mean, He's pushing us around, keeping us in the dark. Abraham shows how much of a lie that is. All Abraham knows is what he's been told, and what he's been told doesn't add up. Isaac is your miracle boy, Abraham, not just to make you happy but also to fulfill all my promises to you. A lot of Christian writing likes to paint this as a First Commandment moment. What I mean by that is people tend to take this and say, look at what Abraham was willing to sacrifice for God. He was willing to give up the thing that meant everything to him to obey God. But that misses the point. This isn't a test of Abraham's unquestioning obedience. It isn't. This is a test of Abraham's willingness to listen to God's words, and trust God on the basis of His words. Do you trust my promise, Abraham? Do you trust what I have said, Abraham? That is what God is asking. Do you trust me more than you trust yourself, do you trust my words more than your logic, your thinking, your feelings? A dead Isaac can have no children. A dead Isaac can inherit no land or make no bloodline. But Abraham is told to make Isaac dead.

Have you ever had God do this to you? I have. He has not asked me to sacrifice my son obviously, twice now I have been challenged by God to believe His words, His

promises, rather than what I see, and I failed. I failed because the thing God was asking me to give up was too important, too dear to me. I couldn't trust that He would take care of it. Don't do what I did. Do what Abraham did. Isaac was everything, Abraham knew that, but Abraham also saw what I couldn't see: That God knows that too. God knows when to hold and when to fold, God knows what's really important and when it is really important. Abraham trusted what God said, and that more than anything else is what makes a Christian. Trust what God says. You can see it here. Isaac will live, and Isaac did live, because God had promised that He would. Abraham heard it. You do too. You have been promised that Christ lives, and that you live in Christ, and that because of that none of this is the pointless, meaningless slog that it seems to be someday. You have been promised that Christ has won you, He has you, He loves you, He cannot forget you, He will not forsake you, and you have it, because Christ has won that for you. When you were baptized you were given that promise, made that child of God, and it is to that you should look and trust. I will never leave you or forsake you, your sins are forgiven, and when you die you shall be with me. Those words are in your ears, keep them there, because it is by those words we learn to trust even when God seems to ask for the one thing that we don't want Him to ask for.

Eventually Isaac himself gets in on this, and he quickly figures out that something is missing. **“Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”** **8 Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”** And so God did. What to learn from this? Well, this simple statement summarizes a lot of the good things we can take from this. God doesn't need your trust, but He asks for it. God doesn't require your obedience or your worship, but He delights in them anyway. God doesn't need you, or me, or anyone, He's God, He has all. You are not giving these things to God because He needs them. You are giving these things to God because you need them. You need to give them. Abraham's words here are so amazing. God will provide for himself the lamb. God is not the issue here, you are. Your natural mistrust,

your sinful self, is the reason that God demonstrates these things and says these words, and they are the reason why God pushes our trust so far sometimes. God knows what is best for you, you all know that, and sometimes what is best for you is to go out on that limb of trust and cling only, only, to the promises that God gives you. God is at His most infuriating when He seems to say one thing, promise one thing, then do another, through circumstance or whatever it may be. Look to Abraham and see the truth of that. God cannot lie, He does not trick, and He does not deceive or contradict Himself. God said that Christ came to make you holy, and He did. God said that you are holy, and you are. God said that He loves you because Christ dwells in you, and He does. Simple things to say, hard things to exercise, but in the exercise of those things, our trust in God deepens, our faith gets stronger, and our true self, the holy and pure and sinless you, shines ever brighter.

Do you trust these promises? Good for you, keep it up. Do you doubt these things? Welcome to the club, you are not alone. By those doubts, by the bending of your faith, God shows Himself faithful more than we could ever dream, just as He did to Abraham. It wasn't Isaac strapped to that altar, ready to be slaughtered. It was Abraham's trust in God that was on the line, it was God's promises on the line. God didn't give Abraham a reward for good behavior. No, what God gave Abraham was what He promised to give Abraham all along, and He made Abraham trust Him to get it done even when it seemed like He had changed His mind. God will do the same to you. He has promised you Jesus, and He gives you Jesus. He has promised you a future free from sin and death, and He will give you that future, even if it takes all summer or years of your life. He has promised you, in the meantime, an ear, a connection, and a sympathetic presence in your life, one who won't just be there for you, but will be on your side for you. You may fail to trust Him. I did, and have. But He will never fail to save you from that mistrust.

Amen.