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## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, October 4, 2009

### Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

#### *Strange But True*

Genesis 22:1-19

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Sarah had laughed in disbelief when God told Abraham that he would have a son. Sarah gave her maidservant Hagar to Abraham. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.

Sarah gave birth to a son as God had promised. Without a son, Abram, whose name changed to Abraham at the covenant of circumcision,<sup>1</sup> could never have a multitude of descendants, inherit the land or be a blessing to all the nations.

Sarah anticipated that her joy would be universally shared. The source of one person's joy can prove to be the cause of another's jealousy.

Abraham named his son Isaac just as he was directed.<sup>2</sup> He also circumcised Isaac on the eighth day as prescribed.<sup>3</sup>

Isaac grew and became strong. Abraham's joy increased as he looked at his son growing and maturing in the promise of the covenant. That troubled Hagar and Ishmael. So, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away. Ishmael and his mother lived in the wilderness near Egypt. Hagar gave Ishmael a wife from her people. He grew in strength and developed into a great nation. Ishmael had twelve sons. Ishmael and his twelve sons warred against their brothers.

The Abraham story is not fundamentally about evil or the justice of God. Rather, it asks about faith, which Kierkegaard has shown, drives us to dread before the self is yielded to God. In the Abraham story, God is shown to be freely sovereign just as he is graciously faithful. That God provides shows his gracious faithfulness. That God tests is a disclosure of his free sovereignty. Abraham comes to awareness

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 17:3-8

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 17:19

that the two marks of God are always encountered together. Abraham must hold together and embrace both the command of God and his promise. This is the test.

The test is for Abraham is this: God promised Abraham that he would bless him, give him a land and make him a blessing to all nations. And, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son. In the Abraham story, God's promise gave Abraham life and the demand for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac seemed, from Abraham's perspective, to take away life.

Promise and command (sacrifice) do not naturally fit well together. But this is the crucible of the Christian faith. The promise of eternal life is coupled with the command to lose our life. To assert that God provides requires a faith as intense as does the conviction that God tests. Both assertions affirm that God, only God and none other, is the source of life.

Institutional, cultural or personal sacrifice goes against our nature. Whereas promises provide, sacrifices test. It is difficult to "give-up" something that has become important to us. We wonder about outcomes. Being tested institutionally, culturally or personally creates opportunities to understand and experience sacrifice. Sacrifice is a test of resolve, purpose, motivation, integrity, calling and obedience. God's tests build your faith like nothing else can. The same God who sets the tests in sovereignty is the one who resolved the tests in graciousness. This was the case for Abraham in his test as it is for us in ours.

God was obligated to fulfill his promise to Abraham. Abraham's obedience confirmed God's obligation. People had only to listen to Abraham tell the story of his obedience to God when he was asked to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, for the sake of God's command, to understand being tested. You know the story. Isaac was no longer a baby. He knew what pertained to sacrifice and could carry a load of wood. The test Abraham faced came from God. Isaac, the child God gave Abraham and Sarah after long delay, was the only link that could lead to the promised greatness of Abraham's seed.<sup>4</sup>

What was Abraham's test? Isaac was to be given back to God. Abraham was asked to sacrifice

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<sup>3</sup>Genesis 17:12

the joy of the present and the promise of his future. The entire test concerns binding Abraham to God in radical faith. Abraham finds his only refuge in the divine provider whom he finds inscrutable but reliable.

Frank Brock, former president of Covenant College<sup>5</sup> writes, “Teenagers who are openly committed to Christ often are pushed to pursue some sort of full-time ‘Christian service.’”<sup>6</sup> That was true for me and I do not regret it. I am one of fourteen ordained from my 400 member Presbyterian Church in Fresno, California. What happens to us when we become adult Christians? Brock continues, “Whether they are paid or volunteer, less than one-fifth of the members of any church are actually involved as pastors, elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers or Bible study leaders.”<sup>7</sup> Less than 20% of the members of any congregation is doing ministry.

What is to be gained from such a statistic? An understanding of what our mission is. What is that mission? To give ourselves back to God so that we then see ourselves as God’s instruments to effect radical change in the world for the cause of Christ.

But here is the test. The promise is that we are to be a blessing to all people. By faith in Jesus Christ, we have been adopted into the Abrahamic covenant. But to fulfill and experience the promise, we are to sacrifice things we hold very important to us; things that we believe are signs of the promise.

Eastminster has a membership of 2257. The full-time staff numbers thirty and the part-time staff another forty-five. If Frank Brock is correct in his article barely twenty-percent of any congregation is involved in ministry, then that number at Eastminster is 452. 452 out of 2257 people are carrying the ministry load of this congregation.

The test before us this day is this: God’s Word tells us that when we trust the Lord we will receive a peace that surpasses all understanding. God’s Word also tells us that following Jesus requires persecution. The promise is peace and the command is to so follow Jesus that we are persecuted for righteousness sake. Using the statistical analysis of who is doing ministry in today’s church, the promise

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<sup>4</sup>Genesis 15:4

<sup>5</sup>Lookout Mountain, Georgia

<sup>6</sup>Frank Brock, “Practical Priesthood,” in *Life@Work* (March/April 2000).

is that if we ask anything in God's name and it will be done. The command is that we are to do the work of ministry.

The promise is comfort, but the command is sacrifice. God is asking us to sacrifice the comfort of someone doing ministry for you and doing it yourself. Strange, but true; as a congregation, we are firmly planted in a consumer culture. We want it when we want it and we do not want to be inconvenienced. If we say and identify ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, are we living out the atonement, that is making sacrifice, for the sake of others to see, know and experience the love of God? That was Abraham's test.

The same test is ours.

Listen carefully to this story that Leonard Sweet, former Dean of the Theological School at Drew University, conveys:

One of our students received an appointment from a bishop, and the student did not feel the placement exactly suited his abilities. I overheard him complaining about it to another student, and then the other student said, "You know, you sound like my mother's housekeeper who says, 'I don't do windows.'" That student continued, "You know, the world's a better place because Michelangelo did not say, 'I don't do ceilings.'" Her comment stopped me dead in my tracks. I had to admit she was right. If you and I are going to be faithful to the ministry God is calling us to, then we had better understand that. I reflected on the attitudes of key people throughout the Scriptures and the history of the church. The world's a better place because a German monk named Martin Luther did not say, "I don't do doors." The world's a better place because an Oxford don named John Wesley didn't say, "I don't do preaching in fields." The world's a better place because Moses didn't say, "I don't do Pharaohs or mass migrations." The world's a better place because Noah didn't say, "I don't do arks and animals." The world's a better place because Rahab didn't say, "I don't do enemy spies." The world's a better place because Ruth didn't say, "I don't do mothers-in-law." The world's a better place because Samuel didn't say, "I don't do mornings." The world's a better place because David didn't say, "I don't do giants." The world's a better place because Peter didn't say, "I don't do Gentiles." The world's a better place because John didn't say, "I don't do deserts." The world's a better place because Mary didn't say, "I don't do virgin births." The world's a better place because Paul didn't say, "I don't do correspondence." The world's a better place because Mary Magdalene didn't say, "I don't do feet." The world's a better place because Jesus didn't say, "I don't do crosses." And the world will be a better place only if you and I don't say, "I don't do ..."<sup>8</sup>

In Jesus Christ the covenant made to Abraham is fulfilled. In Jesus Christ, Isaac and Ishmael are reconciled. In Jesus Christ, the way is possible for every person to be reconciled to God. God is obligated

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Adapted from remarks made by Leonard Sweet, a member of faculty at United Theological Seminary, in Dayton, Ohio as found in *Leadership*, vol. 15, no. 2.

to fulfill the covenant. How will people know, unless those who are followers of Jesus Christ tell them? All people can be reconciled with God through the Abrahamic covenant, because of Jesus Christ. That is the nature of the covenant. All can be reconciled, but not everyone believes. Communicating that all can be reconciled in Jesus Christ is the task and calling for followers of Jesus. God desires that all be saved. But, and this is a significant “but,” belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is essential in order to know and experience that reconciliation. Belief is the work of God known as regeneration. People must hear the good news in order to recognize the work of God regenerating their soul. You and I must communicate the Abrahamic covenant, which is fulfilled and completed in Jesus Christ. We must tell others about Jesus Christ.

The promise made to Abraham, passed on to Isaac and then to Jacob is that God’s people are to be a blessing to all people. The truth of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is that all things are reconciled. But, without personal belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, a person cannot know that their reconciliation with God has been accomplished. How can you become a person that does the task and calling of communicating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone and everyone?

We must overcome our self-absorbed fixations to preferences and convenience. How do we do that? By reexamining our relationship with Jesus Christ, the sacrifice he made for each one of us and how through that sacrifice we are reconciled to the Father. Our commitment to preferences and convenience are sinful. Romans 6:1 states that we should not keep on sinning so that grace may increase. That is mocking God and his forgiveness to keep on sinning and believing all will be well. To the contrary, we have died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? As Paul writes, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”<sup>9</sup> We must celebrate our reconciliation. We must want reconciliation for others. Our inability to live out the atonement, that is avoiding the conflict salvation causes to those we

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<sup>9</sup>Romans 6:3-4

most love and emanates out in consecutive spheres of influence, is caused by our inability to do what Abraham did which was to offer up what was most important to him, his son, and trust that God would still fulfill the promise. God is obligated to honor obedience.

It is strange, but true. God is obligated to fulfill his promise. He will use his people to be a blessing to others. But without viewing sacrifice as integral to God's sovereignty and providence, we will not be about our primary mission of being a blessing to others. Humanity will not be released from its entitlement bias unless individual hearts are changed by Jesus Christ. Change happens one life at a time; through one conversation at a time between one follower of Jesus and another who is desperately attempting to find a better way to live. The poor will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells them. The high school dropout will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells him. The agnostic will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells her. The prisoner will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells him. The sexual predator will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells him. The waiter at Jimmy's Diner will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells her. The Iraqi Muslim will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells him. The drug addict will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells her. The Hindu college student will not come to know Jesus Christ unless someone tells her. The children of Isaac, Ishmael and our children will not be reconciled with God until someone tells them about Jesus Christ. Telling about and showing others Jesus requires sacrifice. It is strange, but true.

Reconciliation rarely occurs without sacrifice. We see that in Abraham and Isaac; strange, but true. We see that in the Father and Jesus; strange, but true. By giving his one and only Son, Jesus Christ, God took the initiative in making the way possible to heal our broken relationship with him. He made the supreme sacrifice for us that we might be reconciled to him. The promise of God to Abraham is that through Isaac his descendants would be named. The command of God is that Isaac must be killed. The promise of God to Jesus is that all who believe in him will not perish but will have eternal life. The command of God is that Jesus must be killed.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. The Word asserts that God is the author of life; that sin is deadly, but God has a way out of the predicament; that there is a way for a new beginning; that God's intent for you and me is other than we deserve; that God will accomplish incredible things through you; that God remembers you even when you forget him; that God will wipe away your fear and enable you to go through anything in life with courage; that God's tests build your faith like nothing can.

Perhaps the greatest test each of us faces this day and there are many is to sacrifice something that is of extreme importance, like a preference or a convenience, in order to do the work of ministry which is our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. To be a follower of Jesus requires losing our life in order to find it.<sup>10</sup> You know, the world will be a better place only if more followers of Jesus don't say, "I don't do ministry." We are tested to make a difference. Doing ministry makes that difference. The Table is about the test of sacrifice. It is strange, but true. God's tests build your faith like nothing else can. Let us pray!

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<sup>10</sup>Matthew 10:39