

Sermon: **Whole-life Worship**

Text: Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 12:1.2

Reverend James R. Henry
The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church
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The story of God and Abraham on Mount Moriah is a story, perhaps *the* story, of Abraham's worship of God. It describes what I'm calling *whole-life worship*. It's everything we are in life bowing to the Supreme God.

Abraham's three day hike to the mountain was something more than a quick drive to church on Sunday morning to meet good friends, to enjoy the music and hope to gain some insight to help him cope with the problems of life and to experience something that will help him feel a little better about himself. God is asking Abraham for the sacrifice of his son, his only son Issac, whom he loved. And Abraham calls it *worship!!!*

When they arrive at the mountain Abraham says to his two traveling attendants, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there, and we will worship."

Oh my God... what kind of worship is this? How much do I know of this kind of worship? How much do I want to know of this kind of worship? It's really quite disturbing. It raises all kinds of questions.

How could Abraham ever do such a thing? How could any loving father begin to even entertain the idea, let alone "get up early the next morning, saddle up his donkey, cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out to the place in the distance that God had shown him"? How could he ever begin to do that?

More disturbing still... how could God, a loving God, the father-figure God, ask such a thing?

We have so many questions. Abraham asks none. We raise our objections and look for explanations but the story offers none. It refuses to be explained away.

Yes, animal sacrifice and burnt offerings were a common feature of Israel's worship, but not child sacrifice. Yes, the gods of other contemporary religions demanded child sacrifice, but not Israel's God. Stranger still and more perplexing is the fact that God had promised Abraham that through his son Issac, his descendents would become a great nation and a blessing to the whole world. And Issac had been miraculously born to Abraham and Sarah well after their fertile years. The sacrifice of Issac would nullify the future of God's covenant promise to Abraham. What is God doing here?... to himself?... to his own promise and integrity?

Go figure. We try.

The cheap resolve is to quickly gloss over the whole story because we know the ending. In the end God provides a ram caught in a thicket. We know this is a test. The story is introduced with the words, "God tested Abraham", and the story ends with an angel blessing Abraham for not withholding his son, and reaffirming God's covenant promise that Abraham's offspring will be as the stars in the heavens and as the sand on the sea shore. So we say, "See, this is only a test" Like the interruptions on the radio and TV... "This is only a test... not to worry... if this were an actual emergency we would give you further information about what to do... but this is only a test, so don't worry about it... forget it and get on with your life."

I'm suggesting that this was something more than a momentary interruption or inconvenience. It was a decisive act of worship that summed up the whole of Abraham's life, past, present and future.

There is implicit in this story, more theological significance and implication that I can unwrap this morning. But if we can only, to a degree, climb into Abraham's skin, or better, look into his heart and try to grasp what he meant when he said, "We will worship."

What kind of worship is this? How much do you know of this kind of worship? How much do you want to know about this kind of worship?

A number of years ago, at a conference on the subject of worship, the speaker was talking about the essence of worship in its fullest dimension. He said, "Always remember that praise is but one finger on the hand of worship." He was saying that praise is one smaller part of the larger dimension of worship. We tend to use the words "praise" and "worship"

interchangeably. But it had always seemed to me that there was a distinction but I couldn't define the difference. It sent me on a study and here's what I found.

Throughout the scriptures the word "praise" is found in the context of the sounds of worship. The tone is festive and celebratory. It's jubilate, joy and rejoicing. It involves singing and exaltation. The posture is that of rising up in praise to God... lifting the voice and hands in praise... lifting up the name of God... dancing, etc. You can hear the tone in the first part of the *Venite*. *O come, let us sing unto the Lord; let us heartily rejoice in the strength of our salvation.*

In contrast, the posture of "worship" is bowing down; kneeling down; prostrating oneself before the Lord. The tone is that of consecration, contrition, offering, and surrender. We hear this tone in the second part of the *Venite*. *O come let us worship and fall down and kneel before the Lord our Maker, for he is the Lord our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.*

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Issac was the deepest act of worship; a bowing down; a humbling of himself before the Supreme God. I'm sure Abraham wasn't jumping and singing and dancing and making a joyful noise unto the Lord just then. He was bowing before the Lord. It was the epitome of solemn surrender and offering. His life's story is dotted with alters. He lived a life of worship to God.

I began to understand what the man meant when he said, "Praise is but one finger on the hand of worship". This kind of worship is acted out and lived in covenant relationship with God. God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, who did not withhold his own son but offered him in loving sacrifice as the gift of salvation. And our response is one of whole-life worship – the giving of everything we are to God – the sacrifice of ourselves, our very lives, not as burnt offerings but as Paul says as "living sacrifices" "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *spiritual worship*."

Abraham gave himself to God. The story of Abraham on Mount Moriah is not about child sacrifice. It's about self sacrifice. Before he ever got up early in the morning and saddled up his donkey and cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out to Moriah, he had already laid himself on the alter in self sacrifice to God. That was implicit every time he responded to God's call saying "Here I am."

We hear the same tone in the Virgin Mary when she is told she will bear a son. In her perplexity says "How can these things be?" But in the offering of herself she says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

We hear the same in Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In his deep distress he cries, "Abba Father, for you all things are possible. Remove this cup from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

We hear it in the prayer of Saint Francis.

*Oh Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

This covenantal relationship with God is made real in the in the Sacraments of the Church.

In baptism we receive children as God's gift; his sacred trust. We offer them back in trust to God. We offer ourselves to God as parents, sacrificing our self interests to the care and good of the child. And we offer ourselves to God as a church community of faith, giving ourselves to the spiritual care and enrichment of this child.

In the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, we receive the loving grace of God in the gift of his Son, our Savior. We receive his body, given, broken for us; and his blood, shed for our forgiveness. We receive the living presence of the Living Christ in covenant with us and we offer ourselves back in loving surrender and service.

This whole-life worship is not an incidental side-line activity exclusive to Sunday morning. It is a way of life, lived out in covenant relationship to God.

And it is a relationship and way of life that is absolutely transforming. It is transforming because it is not our effort to get God to relate to us in what we call our “reality”. Rather it is our continual response to God’s calling us to relate to him and to make our lives relevant to the higher reality of his kingdom... that his will may be done on earth as it is in heaven. As that higher reality is lived out in our lives in covenant relationship with God, we are being transformed in every way... by the renewing of our minds, our perspective, our world-view, our values and desires, and we are thus enabled to discern what is the will of God – what is good and perfect.

This is a decided and radical transformation for people of our western / American culture. We are driven by an individualism that tends to elevate the self to ultimate reality. It often leads to a self-focused brand of spirituality that has been referred to by some as “Sheilaism”... a kind of self-interested and self-absorbing sort of spirituality. Robert Bellah, in his book *Habits of the Heart*, tells of an interview with a woman named Sheila who described her faith in God as one mediated and directed by “her own little voice”, independent of any religious tradition or community. That kind of self-oriented spirituality has thus been coined, “Sheilaism”. It ends up being more the worship of self than the worship of God. This kind of religion has more to do with our own feelings of wellbeing and health and security and it is all reduced to a mere coping mechanism.

What I am saying is that true religion and true worship of God bows to God, the Supreme and Sovereign God, in absolute self-sacrifice. It is a whole-life worship of God that brings continuing transformation to our lives. Rather than being conformed to this world, according to our will and ways, we are being transformed by that which is God’s will – that which is ultimately good and perfect.

*O come, let us worship and fall down
and knee before the Lord our Maker.
For he is the Lord our God,
and we are the people of his pasture
and the sheep of his hand. Amen.*