

**Summer Series: *Wrestling with Tough Texts, With God, Together***

At First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

9:30–10:15 AM – Open Forum and Bible Study with the Pastor

10:30 AM – Worship the Living Christ, with Open Communion

- July 7 Matthew 22: 15-22 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“Render Unto Caesar...”*  
Subject to Ponder: One Nation...Under God
- July 14 Genesis 22: 1-19 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“The Sacrifice of Isaac”*  
Subject to Ponder: Priorities and Providential Care
- July 21 I Timothy 2:8-15 Rev. Anna Strickland  
Sermon Title: *“As Is Proper for Women”*  
Subject to Ponder: Proper Roles for Women: Wife & Mother?
- July 28 Judges 19:1-30 Rev. Anna Strickland  
Sermon Title: *“Has Such A Thing Ever Happened?”*  
Subject to Ponder: Brutality and Silence in Scripture
- Aug 4 Amos 7: 1-6 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“The Lord Repented”*  
Subject to Ponder: Talking God Out of Vengeance
- Aug 11 Leviticus 18: 22; 20: 13 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“So-Called Clobber Texts”*  
Subject to Ponder: Human Sexuality and the Holy Bible
- Aug 18 Job 2: 1-10 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“Skin for Skin, Said the Adversary”*  
Subject to Ponder: God Made a Deal with the Devil
- Aug 25 Matthew 19: 1-12 Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert  
Sermon Title: *“Is There Life After Divorce”*  
Subject to Ponder: Jesus Weighs In On the Matter

***“The Sacrifice of Isaac”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 14, 2019

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Genesis 22: 1-19 (NRSV)**

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>2</sup> 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 that I shall show you.”

<sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and

saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup> Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.”

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup> Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” <sup>8</sup> Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill<sup>[a]</sup> his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” <sup>12</sup> He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

<sup>13</sup> And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”;<sup>[b]</sup> as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, <sup>16</sup> and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, <sup>18</sup> and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” <sup>19</sup> So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

#### Footnotes:

- a. Genesis 22:10 Or *to slaughter*
- b. Genesis 22:14 Or *will see*; Heb traditionally transliterated *Jehovah Jireh*
- c. Genesis 22:14 Or *he shall be seen*

#### Sermon Outline

- I. Now I Know Our God is Different (*Sacrifice of Children Not Required*)
- II. Now I Know What Faith Is (*Trust the Lord Will Provide*)
- III. Now I Know How God Has Grown...on Me (*Look at How We've Evolved*)

#### Sermon

#### Now I Know

WC Fields was a rascally, acerbic, sometimes crude comedian,  
a star in Vaudeville and early films.

Late in life, WC Fields was quite ill and in the hospital.

His doctors had informed him he was not long for this earth.  
A friend came to visit and found WC Fields thumbing through a Bible.  
“*What are you doing?*” asked the friend.  
WC Fields responded, “*Looking for loopholes.*”

We are looking into a scripture that has troubled folks since it was first told.

Today’s passage from Genesis  
is multifaceted and complex, rich and rewarding, tough and tender.

Today’s scripture is a story that serves to articulate in narrative form  
Whose and who we are,  
to provide a central piece of the puzzle that shows  
how we came to be the people we have become.

Today’s lesson is read, heard, experienced through the lens of our modern eyes.  
There is simply no other way for any of us to read, hear, experience this Word.  
This is a good thing.

Today is July 14, 2019; we are gathered together in the city of Decatur,  
in this sacred space, where we study the Word and worship the Holy.  
We do not deny or ignore that we approach the Holy Scriptures  
with our modern lens.

We celebrate that fact, acknowledging this is the lens we have been given.  
And that fact helps us to better understand the original context of the passage.

Looking backward from today to days of yesteryear,  
knowing now what we know about how things turned out,  
contemplating here and now what the faith life must have been like  
for Abraham and Sarah and their son, their only son, Isaac,  
and the young families around them in their community...  
all of the above serves to guides us into tomorrow,  
together, with God and one another.

Our multifaceted, rich, tough and tender passage brings to the forefront that:

- (1) Our God is Different, Not Like Other Gods
- (2) Our God Teaches What Faith Is
- (3) Our God Has Grown...On Us

First up: **Now I Know that Our God is Different**

Our God is not like other gods.

Abraham and Sarah were wandering in the wilderness,  
living a nomadic life,

when God called them to pack up and go,  
to go to a land that God would show them.

Trust me, follow me, obey me, said the Lord,

and I will give you as many descendants as stars in the sky, as sand in the desert.

Which undoubtedly struck these two senior citizens as funny – Sarah laughed.

The word “laugh” appears for the first time in the Bible in Genesis 17:17

when God informs 100-year-old Abraham  
that his 90-year-old wife Sarah will give birth to a son.

Both laughed heartily.

God commanded them to name their son Isaac,

which in Hebrew means God’s Laugh.

After Sarai gave birth, she exclaimed, “*God has given me cause to laugh;  
all those who hear of it shall laugh with me.*” (Gen. 21:6)

Laughter is good for the soul;

seeing how other souls live is also good.

Abraham and Sarah, being holy kind of folk,

being religious and aware of neighboring religions and cultures,  
were well aware that nearby cultures practiced child sacrifice.

Some early Israelites might well have asked

-- and justifiably so, considering their time and place, --  
“*Does our God require that we sacrifice our children?*”<sup>11</sup>

Our God is different and sought to nip this in the bud.

*After these things God tested Abraham.*

*He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”<sup>2</sup> 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 that I shall show you.”*

*So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.<sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.*

*Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.<sup>7</sup> Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”*

*Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”*

*So the two of them walked on together.*

Our ancestor was willing.

Abraham was willing to do what God asked, required, demanded.

Our forebearer was willing...yet God did not require such a sacrifice.

Our God is different  
than the surrounding cultural expectations, practices, observations.  
A ram was sufficient.  
God's grace is sufficient.  
What the Lord provides is sufficient.

Any required spiritual cleansing was provided through a sacrificial lamb, if you will.  
Human sacrifice was deemed unnecessary.  
A new faith community, a new people – adults and their young –  
all breathed a sigh of relief.

In effect, our God's actions said to Abraham and Sarah & to the whole people of God:  
*"There will be no sacrifice of children.  
Instead, you shall protect your young and all the children in your midst."*  
Years later in that same land the Child of God said,  
*"Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not:  
for of such is the kingdom of God."* (Matthew 14: 19 KJV)

If and when little children suffer at the hands of others, as innocent victims,  
it is our collective responsibility to see that they be protected,  
that they not become sacrifices,  
sacrificed for anyone's vanity or fear or selfishness.

Our God is different, unique, educational, trusting that we can learn,  
teaching us a hard lesson,  
one that was countercultural in Genesis  
and is, dare I say, countercultural today.

Adults: Be adults.

Protect your young.

Today, at our church camps and on youth retreats,  
on Day One we teach the adult sponsors, *"My kids are your kids."*

Every adult is called and commissioned to keep their eyes open  
to watch out for the welfare of everyone else's kids.

If ever there was a time we did not know this, well, now we know.

When the culture does not reflect love and justice, our God is different.

**Secondly: Now I Know that Our God Teaches What Faith Is**

An overseas missionary was translating the Bible into a local dialect.  
He was stuck on how to translate the word faith.  
He went to the village shaman to seek guidance.  
The shaman pondered the question of how to interpret faith,  
and asked, *"Does it not mean to hear with the heart?"*

For the heart to hear, to listen, to receive, the heart must first be open.  
Abraham's heart was open to listen, to hear the call of God.  
Do you imagine that what he heard, he wished he hadn't?

Abraham, and subsequently Isaac,  
would never have found themselves in this predicament  
had not God decided to test

Remember the story begins: *After these things God tested Abraham.*

What was the test?

What was the exam, the trial, the review?

What was God investigating, assessing, trying to prove?

What did God need, want, seek to learn about Abraham?

And did Abraham suffer from test anxiety?!

We know he knew he was being tested,

and that he was told to sacrifice his son, his only son, whom he loved.

But just as he was about to do the deadly deed, the drama hits a new note.

*<sup>11</sup> But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!"  
And he said, "Here I am."*

*<sup>12</sup> He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him;  
for now I know that you fear God,*

*since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."*

*<sup>13</sup> And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns.*

*Abraham went and took the ram*

*and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.*

"The Lord's miraculous substitution of a ram for Isaac

vindicates Abraham's act of faith,

confirming his earlier statement, "The Lord will provide."<sup>[2]</sup>

"Now I know," says the angel of the Lord, "that you fear God."

The Scriptures, from the Psalms to the Prophets to the Epistles,  
teach us that to fear God

is to respect, revere, recognize the authority of God,

to live into the trust that the Lord will, indeed, provide.

God's test is the degree and depth of Abraham's faith.

*"What is faith?"*

*The biblical tradition answers not with a theological statement,*

*or with a set of propositions,*

*or with admonitions to be faithful,*

*but with a story.*

*It is the story of Abraham,*

*who trusted in God*

*even when God appeared to be acting against God's promise.*

*Faith is like that.*

*Faith in this sense is commitment, the directing of one's trust toward God.*

*[Faith] entails great risk,*

*not in the sense of accepting a set of beliefs,*

*but by acting in trust.*

*Did Abraham know that the God he worshipped would not require Isaac?*

*We cannot know.*

*We are told [in the story] only how [Abraham acted, and how God acted.] <sup>13</sup>*

That, my friends, is faith,

a living, breathing faith,

a faith that passes the ultimate test,

a faith that has already been planted deep within you and me.

The story continues, that upon passing the test,

now that God knows the heart of Abraham,

God rewards him and his family.

The original promise back in Genesis 12 was that if they were faithful

they would have a son, and they would have a legacy.

The Original Promise is now restated:

*"By myself I have sworn, says the Lord:*

*Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,*

*<sup>17</sup> I will indeed bless you,*

*and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven*

*and as the sand that is on the seashore.*

*And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,*

*<sup>18</sup> and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth*

*gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."*

Because in faith, with faith, clinging to their faith

they let go of anything and everything

that might come between them and God, even their son, their only son,

they gain a blessing not only for themselves but all of creation.

Now I know our God is different than other gods.

Now I know our God teaches the core aspect of faith.

And thirdly, **Now I Know that God Has Grown...On Us**

When I was around 19 years old,

I found a Hallmark card in a shop that I loved

yet knew I had to wait two years before I could share it.

So, I bought the card and carefully stored it in a drawer.

Two years later I timed the mailing of it so my father would get the card

on February 10, 1981, my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.  
The card featured a Mark Twain quote, saying:  
*“When I was a boy of 14,  
my father was so ignorant  
I could hardly stand to have the old man around.  
But when I got to be 21,  
I was astonished  
at how much the old man had learned in 7 years.”*  
I took the opportunity to acknowledge how grateful I was  
that he’d loved me through all my ups and downs,  
and how much I appreciated who and Whose he was.

The Bible is very much like this for us, for humanity,  
as we attempt to figure out who God is,  
and to tell the history of our relationship with the Holy One,  
and to articulate within the limits and boundlessness  
of stories and songs, laments and letters, psalms and prophecies  
the tangibles and intangibles of the Will of God.  
After thousands of years of sharing from generation to generation the story of God,  
we know this: we know more now than ever before.

Richard Rohr comments:  
*“I certainly recognize there are many early passages in the Bible  
that present God as punitive and retributive,  
but we must stay with the text—  
and observe how we gradually let God “grow up.”  
God does not change  
as much as human knowledge of God evolves.”*

If you look at the human understanding of the Holy  
in our earliest testimonies  
through to our spiritual forebearers teachings  
in more recent tomes,  
what we know that we know is light years in difference.

Same God, same love, same saving grace:  
the difference is we’ve grown wiser;  
God done raised us up out of the muck and taught us a thing or two.

Compare how we perceived the Lord as told in Genesis  
with the God described in First John 4: 7-12:

*“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God,  
and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*

<sup>8</sup> *Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

<sup>9</sup> *In this the love of God was made manifest among us,  
that God sent his only Son into the world,*



*so that we might live through him.*

*<sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we have loved God  
but that he loved us and sent his Son  
to be the propitiation for our sins.*

*<sup>11</sup> Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*

*<sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another,  
God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”*

So, where are we now?

*<sup>19</sup> So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.*

The mountain upon which God commanded Abraham  
to go to sacrifice his son, his only son, whom he loved,  
was called Mount Moriah.

Scholars are not 100% in agreement where Mt. Moriah was, or is;  
however, our best guess is it is the hill  
upon which the Temple in Jerusalem now rests.

Where are we now?

Now we know that God commands us to worship the Living God on a holy hill,  
in holy cities in the Holy Lands,  
where there are homes for Jews, Christians, and Muslims,  
all children of Abraham and Sarah,  
living legacies of loving and peaceful religions.

We know we will encounter God in places of worship  
as well as in the alley ways and side streets,  
fields, farms, and playgrounds of the Lord.

We know not to sacrifice children, to instead protect and love and raise up children  
—all children, our own and our neighbors’--  
to trust that adults will look out for their best interests and welfare.

We know that God is steady, a constant in times of chaos,  
and that we have the capacity to grow, to evolve,  
to mature in our spirituality,  
and, consequently, in the ways of unconditional love.

This we know, for the Bible tells us so.

*All Power Be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

[\[2\]](#) Harper Study Bible, Genesis 22:13 notes.

[\[3\]](#) Preaching the New Common Lectionary. P. 134.