

OUT OF THE CAVE INTO THE LIGHT
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A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on July 2, 2023

Texts: Genesis 22:1-18 & Matthew 10:37-42

Genesis 22:1-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 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." 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. 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. 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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

Matthew 10:37-42

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive

the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Both readings today are difficult. They're difficult because both God and Jesus do and say things that are frankly unthinkable. In Genesis, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. In Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples they have to put him above their own families, including their own children.

Right away, most people want to either sweep these readings under the carpet or explain them away. God never had any intention of letting Abraham go through with it; it was only a test. Jesus wasn't speaking literally; he was only making a point.

I don't think either of those reactions is helpful or convincing. So, what I want to do today is take a step back and suggest another approach, one that starts with the question, What are these two biblical writers trying to do in the first place? Why would they tell us stories that are so shocking and scandalous?

And full disclosure, these are just my personal thoughts, as someone who struggles with these readings as much as anyone else. I was literally lying in bed last week thinking about all this when this idea popped into my head. So, take what I say with a grain of salt, and make up your minds for yourselves.

So I want to start with a little exercise—call it a guided meditation.

Picture yourself doing all the normal, everyday things you do. You're standing in line at the grocery store. You're driving to work in the morning. You're reading your email. You're sitting in church.

This is your life, and it's all there is. There's nothing else. There's nothing beyond it. Even God fits inside your day-to-day reality. When you close your eyes and pray, you're praying to a God who's familiar, a God you've been hearing about since you were little, a God who lives within the pages of scripture and the beliefs and practices of tradition.

Now, as you go about your business, sometimes good things happen, sometimes bad things happen. But nothing ever happens that breaks through the walls of your perception. Nothing ever happens that shakes up your basic understanding of the world and your place in it. And you're fine with that because even though things can get a little routine sometimes, there's a lot of comfort in that. You have a pretty good idea of what to expect from one day to the next, and you at least feel like you're in control.

Now picture a different reality. You're looking down on a vast ocean, and you see a little speck, smaller than a grain of rice, on the face of the water. That speck is you, all that you are, your whole being; and that vast ocean is God, the divine reality from which all other realities emanate, the source of all that is.

Around you is an unbroken horizon. Beneath you is an unfathomable depth. You sense that there's no edge and no bottom, and the thought of that sends you into a panic. You start thrashing around, trying to keep your head above the surface, until you completely exhaust yourself. Your muscles are burning. Your arms and legs feel like they're made of

cement. You think, This is it, I'm going to drown, and you take one last gulp of air before you start going under.

But then you feel yourself being buoyed up, the ocean itself supporting your weight. You tilt your head all the way back and let yourself float. Your breathing settles into a slow, steady rhythm, and a sense of peace and calm like you've never felt before comes over you. Your whole body relaxes, and your thoughts begin to drift. You close your eyes and see flashes of your life before this. You're standing in line at the grocery store. You're driving to work in the morning. You're reading your email. You're sitting in church. But all of it seems like a dream. What's real is the rolling of the waves, and the undulating of the water, and the feeling of being held and cared for by a loving presence you can't begin to comprehend.

Okay, so what was the point of that exercise? The point was to illustrate what I think our two biblical writers today are trying to do with these stories. And that is, they're trying to get their readers to change their perceptual lens. They're trying to get them to go from their everyday experience of life, like in the first part of the exercise, to a deeper experience of life, like in the second part of the exercise. They're trying to get them to see that reality as they know it is not all there is, but there's a foundational reality beneath it—a reality that generates all others, encompasses all others, and sustains all others.

People have different names for that reality. The name we give it is God, and at the end of the day what I think these writers are trying to say is, Beyond everything else, God is. That simple. Beyond everything we see and experience, everything we think is

important, everything we put our faith in, God is.

And so, if we want a life that's real in the deepest sense, a life that connects with the ground of our being, we need to pursue God with our whole heart. We need to make following God's way, to the extent that we can know it, our highest concern—above money, above power, above status. We need to look beyond what's apparently true and seek that which is eternally and immutably and fundamentally true.

It's like the allegory of the cave from Plato's Republic. Plato tells a story about a group of prisoners who've been chained inside a cave since birth, facing a wall. They're unable to turn their heads and can only see the shadows projected onto the wall by a fire burning behind them. The flickering images on the face of the rock are all they know of reality.

Then one day one of the prisoners breaks free and makes his way out of the cave into the light. At first, he's blinded by the sun and overwhelmed by the brightness of the real world. But gradually his eyes adjust, and he sees the true nature of reality. And having made that discovery, he turns around and goes back into the cave to share it with all the people who are still chained up inside, so they can be free like him.

I think the writer of Genesis and the writer of Matthew are like that escaped prisoner. They're trying to show all of us who are still stuck in the cave, so to speak, that there's more to reality than what we know. In fact, what we know is a mere shadow of what is.

But here's the problem: People don't actually like having their entire worldview turned upside-down. It's unsettling. It freaks us out. In the allegory, the other prisoners are so disturbed by the notion that there's a big, bright world outside

their cave that they turn on the one who escaped and came back, and they kill him.

That's a little extreme, but the point is, you can't just walk up to people and pull the rug out from under them and expect them to respond well. We're just not built that way as human beings. If you want to move people beyond where they are, you have to make them question, but not so much that they have an existential meltdown. You have to make them uncomfortable, but not so much that they pull back and refuse to listen.

That's why these readings are difficult. They're difficult on purpose because they're trying to complicate our understanding of what it means to live a life of faith, without overwhelming us. They're trying to get us to ask, What does it really mean to be in relationship with God? Does following Jesus require more from me than I thought—maybe a lot more?

Because once we start asking questions like that, it cracks open the door to even bigger questions, like, How deep does this life of faith go? Is there more to my existence than the routine things that fill up my days? Is there something out there that I haven't yet discovered?

And once we start asking questions like that, it's only a matter of time before the walls of our perception begin to crumble and we finally step out of the cave into the light. Amen.