



## **FATHER'S DAY**

### **LECTIONARY COMMENTARY**

**Sunday, June 19, 2011**

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**Lection – Genesis 22:1-19** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ (v. 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 that I shall show you.’ (v. 3) 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. (v. 4) On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. (v. 5) 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.’ (v. 6) 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. (v. 7) 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?’ (v. 8) Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.

(v. 9) 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. (v. 10) Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. (v. 11) But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ (v. 12) 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.’ (v. 13) 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. (v. 14) 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.’ (v. 15) The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, (v. 16) and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, (v. 17) 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, (v. 18) and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.’ (v. 19) So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

## **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

The idea of a “father’s day” began with Sonora Louise Smart Dodd, the only daughter born to an Arkansas farmer named William Jackson Smart and his wife, Ellen Victoria Cheek Smart. William Smart, a Civil War veteran, resettled his family after the war to a farm near Spokane, Washington. In 1898, when Sonora was sixteen years old, her mother died giving birth to a sixth child, a son named Marshall. Sonora then helped her father raise the infant and four other brothers.

Eleven years later during a Mother’s Day sermon in 1909, Sonora reflected on the sacrifices her father made while rearing their family as a single parent. She then approached the Spokane Ministerial Alliance, suggested a day to honor fathers, and proposed her father’s birthday (June 5) as the day for that recognition. The Alliance embraced her idea but chose the third Sunday in June. The first Father’s Day celebration occurred in Spokane, Washington on June 19, 1910. In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson issued a presidential proclamation designating the third Sunday in June as Father’s Day. Congress enacted legislation to make Father’s Day permanent in 1972.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Genesis 22:1-19**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

[L]et the men come back home and reclaim the communities, and you’ve gone a long way toward weaving back together that which was broken. You’ve gone a long way

toward banishing the fear. Some of us already know that, have been hard about the work of strengthening families and communities. Some of us are committed and caring fathers, intimately involved in the upbringing of our children. Some of us get up early on Saturday morning and go to a ball field to coach young minds in the finer points of hitting and fielding and life. Some of us go to Big Brothers or some other mentoring group and sign up to be paired with a young man who has never known a father. Some of us organize in our cities or just reach out on our own, using personal money and personal time in the service of children who ache for the knowledge that a man is invested in them and cares what they do. Some of us are there. But more of us are needed.

—Leonard Pitts, Jr., Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood, 1999

The men who inspire my reverence for fatherhood—my “Abraham-figures”—include my father (Bennie Lee Griffen) and other men I recall from my youth in rural southwest Arkansas during the final years of Jim Crow segregation (I’m one of those babies born in the early ‘50s). My dad’s parents (Richard Lee Griffith and Hattie Mae Woods) were teenagers when dad was born, and they never married each other. Grandma Hattie and dad lived with her brother and sister-in-law (Uncle Jack and Aunt Josie Woods). Dad was also nurtured by Grandpa Richard and his wife (Roberta Tate Griffith—”Ma Berta”) and enjoyed the Griffith name and love.

I thank God for what I learned and observed from Bennie Griffen (Dad’s name was messed up during his military service in World War II), Grandpa Richard, and what Dad told me about Uncle Jack Woods. I recall their commitment to hard work, loving toughness, reverence for God, zest for fun, and respect for others. Despite Jim Crow segregation, poverty, and their own frailties, those black men and others like them sacrificed, taught, inspired, challenged, persevered, and overcame. They are my fatherhood heroes, and none of the financial, physical, emotional, moral, and other challenges of our time seem daunting whenever I remember them.

## **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

Genesis 22:1-19 is dramatic, tender, troubling, and compelling narrative. Abraham had waited a lifetime to become a parent. He’d fathered a son (Ishmael) by Hagar, the servant of his wife (Sarah), before he and Sarah were blessed with Isaac in their old, old, age. But the rivalry between Sarah and Hagar was too much, so Abraham expelled Hagar and Ishmael from the household. After going through the drama of giving Ishmael up, Abraham probably didn’t expect greater drama surrounding Isaac, the only son he had left.

In today’s pericope, one can almost see the old man and the lad leaving the family compound with two servants and a donkey back bent with wood. Three days later they arrived near where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac. The narrative tells us that God was testing Abraham.

But Abraham didn’t know this was a test. Isaac didn’t know it either, and he openly wondered how they were to offer a sacrifice to God without a lamb for the burnt offering (Gen. 22:7-8). Isaac’s curiosity and Abraham’s anxiety must have intensified the closer they came to where Abraham was to erect the altar in reverence to God. Abraham had no answer for his child’s curiosity or his own anxiety except to say, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt

offering, my son” (Gen. 22:8). This father loved his child. This child trusted his father. The old man didn’t know what God was doing with him or his child. Still, he somehow wanted to trust himself and the care of his child concerning the strange summons from God.

So the father and son plodded onward. Together they reached the place where an altar was to be erected. They built the altar together much like a father and son doing a weekend construction project. Then the elderly father tied his son to the altar, lifted him in his arms, and laid him on the altar. He took a knife and raised his hand above the bound child. In that dreadful moment, father and son were more afraid and heartbroken than they’d ever been before. A loving father staring at a son to be killed by his hands and a son inching willingly toward death at the hands of one he loved who he knew loved him.

The narrative exposes the powerful truth that the wonderful and tender experience of fatherhood can also be frightening for fathers and children. Fathers and children in every era and location have experienced the tension that exists between parental duty to protect and provide for children and other forces that make children vulnerable. Social, political, cultural, and economic forces operate on fathers externally. Moral, ethical, intellectual, and emotional forces eat at fathers internally.

Every child and every father lives surrounded by those forces as fathers face the challenge of protecting and providing for children who are, meanwhile, anxious to understand what their fathers are trying to achieve as parents. At some point, fathers and children come face-to-face with the difficult truth that children have questions fathers can’t answer and fathers have issues children can’t understand. At some point, every father knows what it means to be Abraham during the moments of our text and every child knows what it means to be Isaac at the same time.

So Genesis 22:1-19 exposes that fatherhood and childhood involves high stakes for fathers, children, and families of every size, configuration, era, and location across the human experience. The pastoral challenge is to help men recognize that and find hope concerning the high-stakes exercise called fatherhood and remain hopeful to that calling in all of its stages.

Some carry painful memories and wounds arising from their father-child relationships. If we preach this text on Father’s Day, we should be mindful about those realities that make up the dramatic tenderness and the troubling anxieties surrounding the father and child relationship.

Above all, though, this passage affirms that God’s loving providence superintends every situation, experience, and challenge that fathers and children face. God is faithful so fathers can be faithful to God and their children. God’s faithfulness trumps Abraham’s anxiety, Isaac’s curiosity, and even their shared dread at the moment of their greatest crisis. Abraham and Isaac seemed trapped in a deadly situation neither understood. Somehow, God provided an answer. Somehow, God made a way. Somehow, God opened a door. Somehow, God’s providential love trumped their dilemma. Somehow, God creates a father of greater faith and a son with a memory that will serve him for the rest of his life.

This text gives us reason to hope and remain faithful to God and to our families even when faced with the worse anxieties, tensions, drama, outside forces, and pain of the father-child relationship. When we live in the strength of God's abiding presence, we learn to accept obvious and hidden fears, past mistakes, sorrows, conflicts, and the highs and lows that come with fatherhood. Then, as fathers we make definitive decisions: We will remain faithful to our God and we will remain faithful fathers to our children.

## **Celebration**

God's faithfulness to fathers and children is ultimately revealed in Jesus. Jesus took on the tears of Gethsemane and the awful altar of Calvary. And in the resurrection, God's faithfulness to Jesus and to us triumphed over all the drama, bitterness, and attacks that Jesus endured. Isaac reminds us of the submission of Christ even in the worst situation imaginable for a child. Abraham reminds us that God has held nothing back, even God's only Son, to prove that God is for us. God is on our side no matter what or who is against us. God is for us in our tests and in our mess. God is for us. Faithful, faithful is our God. That's news to celebrate on Father's Day and always.

## **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details of this narrative include:

**Sounds:** God's speaks to Abraham with the awesome summons to sacrifice Isaac; Abraham's response to God when he says, "Here I am"; Isaac's chilling and innocent inquiry: "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb..."; Abraham's response at v. 9 ("God himself will provide the lamb ...") and the conflict he experienced even while speaking those words; God's saying to Abraham "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."

**Sights:** Abraham, Isaac, the two servants, and a donkey leaving the family compound; their trek to the place God had commanded Abraham to go; Isaac and Abraham walking together; Abraham building the altar; Abraham shifting the wood from the donkey onto the body of his son; Abraham binding Isaac, placing him on the altar, and raising his knife above the boy as the boy watched him; Abraham looking up at as God's command him to see the ram (v. 13); Abraham celebrating God's faithfulness as Isaac watched and pondered the meaning of what happened.

## **III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use**

- For a long time I sat between the two graves and wept. When my tears were finally spent, I felt a calmness wash over me. I felt the circle finally close. I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America—the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago—all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than

the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My questions were my brothers' questions. Their struggle was my birthright.

—Barack Obama, Dreams from My Father, 1995, 2004

- I like children. Nothing I've ever done has given me more joy and reward than being a father to my five. In between those joys and rewards, of course, have come the natural strife of family life, the little tensions and conflicts that are part of trying to bring civilization to children. The more I have talked about such problems, the more I have found that all other parents had the very same ones ...

—Bill Cosby, Fatherhood, 1986

- There is perhaps no mystique of motherhood that a man cannot master except for the physical realities of a pregnancy, delivery, and breastfeeding. All other ingrained notions about which sex makes the more natural parent are at least challengeable. Men too can be “primary care givers” and can provide “mother love.”

—Alvin F. Poussaint, M.D. in Fatherhood, by Bill Cosby, 1986