

“Living Sacrifice”  
Based on Genesis 22: 1-14  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
Longview Presbyterian Church  
June 26, 2011

I’ve heard that in times of great fear, great danger, great risk, our senses are heightened and our experience of the passage of time is altered—it can feel as though time stands still. I know this to be true. I know from personal experience.

It all began so early. Unusually early. My father shook me awake before there was even a hint of dawn in the sky. He said, “Get up, my son. My beloved. We must go up the mountain.” Confused and sleepy but always the obedient son, I gathered my clothes, dressed and followed my father.

I knew what “going up the mountain” meant. Many times my father and I journeyed up the mountain to offer our sacrifices to Yahweh. Many times. But this time was different. Every time before much planning and forethought went into the sacrifices. Weeks ahead, sometimes even months ahead, we would begin the search among the livestock for the perfect animal. The best sheep or ox or bull to set aside for the sacrifice. Only the best would do. Only the best was an acceptable for our offering to God.

Days before our departure we would plan which servants to take with us, exactly how many donkeys, how many sacrificial animals to take, how many days we would be gone and how much to take with us for provisions.

But this was completely unplanned—at least, to my knowledge. And that was what worried me. Why was I not included in the preparation? I might have been offended that my father didn’t include me in the plans had I not been so worried that I might be included in the plans, in a way I would never wish for. I tried not to think of the unthinkable, of what it might all mean. After all, I was young but I was not a child. I had heard of things that worshippers of other gods sometimes do. But Father always assured me that Yahweh would never require— such a sacrifice. I tried not to think too much.

So while questions swirled around in my mind, I silently, obediently followed my father. We traveled for three days in virtual silence. Three days that felt more like three years. Father not speaking, not even looking at me, avoiding my pleading, questioning eyes. Even the two servants traveling with us, even they sensed the dread and anxiety that pushed us forward, driving us on like sheep to the slaughter.

On that third day we got to the point where we leave the donkeys and servants behind and continue on, just Father and me with the supplies and usually the animal to be sacrificed. As always, Father said, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.” *We* will come back? He said “*we* will come back.” Did he mean it? Or did he say it to deceive? Or did he

simply say it out of habit? Was it possible, as I hoped, that I was mistaken? That I was jumping to false conclusions out of fear. Perhaps I was.

My stomach felt sick as I took the wood for the burnt offering. Full of fear. Full of hope. Fear that I was shouldering the wood for my own sacrifice; hope that I was not. Surely Father would not have me carry wood for my own sacrifice.

At last I could not go on another step without asking the question. I *had* to ask, but hated to ask. “Father?” “Here I am, my son,” he replied, further raising my suspicions that this was no ordinary sacrifice. “Here I am,” is how a subordinate answers a master. How a son answers a father. How a human answers God. But for Father to answer *me* with, “Here I am,” just added to the peculiarity and cause for concern. I took a deep breath and asked, “where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” Father said nothing.

We continued to climb and he said nothing. Seconds passed. Minutes passed. At last he replied, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And we continued to walk. I, no more convinced by Father’s answer. Ever fearful. Ever hopeful.

Over and over in my mind I argued, “How could Father sacrifice me? I am the promised child of his old age. He was elderly by the time I was born. Mother, too. How could he sacrifice his one and only son? The son whom he loves? And then I would recall that we are called to offer the best to God. Only the best to God. Could this be some kind of backwards, paradoxical way of showing thanks to God for the gift of his son, to offer the son back in sacrifice? Surely Mother was not in on the plan. Surely Mother would not allow it. Surely Mother would protect me as long as there was breath in her body.

We got to the place for the sacrifice. Still no lamb. We prepared the wood. And waited. And waited. Then, Father took the rope and began to bind me up. And I let him. Oftentimes people hear this story and are impressed by Father’s obedience to God. But what of my obedience? Father was a weak old man. I was a strong young man. He never could have bound me up without my cooperation. But I, too, had faith in God. Or maybe I had faith in my father. Either way, my father fed my hope that what appeared to be happening was not really happening.

However, my faith and hope and trust in my father were put to the ultimate test. As my father raised the knife, it hovered. For an eternity his hand was frozen but for the knife shaking, blinding shafts of sunlight glimmering off the blade. Finally he drew the knife back just a bit, ready to strike. As the knife started down I shut my eyes, waiting for the blow but instead of feeling the knife I heard Father say, “Here I am,” again. Who was he talking to? Then he began frantically unbinding me, crying and kissing me all the while. And I looked up and saw it. The ram caught in a thicket. I can tell you, it was not there before. The Lord did provide. We sacrificed the ram, the most incredible creature I have ever seen before or since.

When our worship was done, without a word we headed back down the mountain. When Father broken the silence at last he told me that Yahweh told him to do it. I asked, “Why didn’t you try to talk God out of it? You told me before God doesn’t require child sacrifice as other gods do. Why didn’t you try to make a deal with God like you have in the past?”

Father’s only reply, “I had faith.”

“What do you mean? You had faith that—what? What did you think would happen?” I *wanted* him to say, “I knew that God wouldn’t really let me sacrifice you. I knew that God would stop me.” I wanted some kind of assurance that Father was never *really* going to kill me.

But “I had faith,” was his only reply.

I can’t pretend that this incident left my relationship with my father unscathed. Or my relationship with Yahweh was strengthened or even unharmed. It was difficult for me to honor a God who would ask a father to sacrifice his son as a test. It was hard to love and trust a father who was willing to do so, without a question. But after that, it seemed that Father prospered even more. God seemed pleased. Father seemed pleased.

Years later when Father was on his death bed, I came to him. He took my hand and looked deep into my eyes and said, “I had faith.”

“Yes, I know Father. You have a strong faith. You are an example for us all.”

“No,” he stopped me. “I had faith. That day. The day of ‘the Lord will provide;’ I had faith. I knew that God would not break the promise of offspring. I knew that God wouldn’t give me a beloved son, a miracle, only to demand him back as a sacrifice.”

“*How* did you know, Father,” I asked unconvinced that he was recalling what actually happened rather than remembering what he wanted to remember. As he wanted to remember. *After* everything turned out ok, it’s easy to say that he knew that everything would work out ok, but at the time, how could he have really known?

“Don’t you see,” he replied, growing weary and yet agitated, “Yahweh isn’t like those other gods. Yahweh doesn’t demand the blood of our children. The only sacrifice God demands of us is a *living* sacrifice of ourselves. Yahweh rejects the sacrifices of our children. God wants children, all God’s children, to live and thrive, to give our best, our best selves, our best lives as *living* sacrifices, serving God, worshipping God, giving ourselves to God, living for God. And God does provide. Sometimes we don’t see God’s provision in the midst of our troubles and suffering. But all we have to do is look up and see what we weren’t able to see before: God’s provision waiting for our embrace.”