

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Sacred Trajectory ”
2nd in the series *The Inspired Text*
Genesis 12:1-4; 22:1-14

Earlier, we heard the famous story of Abraham’s first calling. It’s a story so short and simple; we miss just how significant this moment is... a moment that sets the stage for everything else that will happen in the rest of the Bible.

Last week I told you that the Bible isn’t an answer book. It’s more like a map, showing us the way to discover the answers. And this story is one of the first stops on this map. It’s one we really have to get if we want to understand everything else.

So imagine for a moment that you’re living in a pre-civilized world. You’ve grown up in a small tribe made up of your extended family... and you live or die by the strength of your family and tribe. Death is a very real, and normal part of your life. There’s no medication. The only food you have is what your tribe can hunt, or grow and protect.

Occasionally your tribe is attacked by neighboring tribes... Because they need more space, or because they need more women to make more children, because the only way to keep your tribe, and your story, and your identity alive is by having more children.

In fact, your children and their children are the only way you have meaning beyond the death and chaos of your life. You know you will die and you hope to become an ancestor one day... and that gives you meaning and purpose. But without children to start the next generation, there is only dark emptiness when you die. A great nothingness. Your tribe and your story cease to exist.

So everything you do is about the life of your tribe,
just as it is for everyone else.

You accumulated possessions, fought battles, made alliances, all in the name of preserving your tribe.

Your life, your identity, your meaning, revolves around your tribe.

Then one day, you hear this voice, or you have this vision, or a holy longing stirs in you. It’s the voice of God... or one of the gods... or ancestors... You’re not sure, but you know that it is a divine presence calling you to leave your tribe.

Everyone would tell you you’re crazy... And not just because it’s a hard world, but also because leaving is a kind of death. And even if you don’t physically die, it’s a break with all your tribe and their story.

But you do it... because this divine urging won’t let you go. And it’s not just about leaving something... it’s an invitation to something new.

It is an invitation to be the beginning of an entirely new kind of tribe, the kind of tribe that has been unimaginable before this point. ***A tribe that does not exist for its own self-preservation, but a tribe that exists to be a blessing to all the tribes of the entire earth!***

Which is a bit of a crazy idea. It’s not how the world works! Tribes at that time...or in our time for that matter... exist for their own well-being and preservation.

But the calling... the invitation... that Abraham hears...
and decides to respond to... and pack up and leave everything he has known... is to be
the beginning of a new kind of tribe, a tribe of people whose identity and story is about blessing all the
other tribes of the world.

“All peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

This moment sets the trajectory for the rest of the Bible. This is the story and calling that is lived
out and wrestled with and pushed against and grown into... in the unfolding, winding story of the Bible.

And here is where we come to one of the key interpretive principles for understanding this map.
The Bible has a trajectory... a direction... an overarching forward movement... of learning how to live
into this great calling... and learning who this God is that has called them.

Abraham does not understand this calling and this God as well as Moses.
And Moses doesn't understand as well as Isaiah
And Isaiah doesn't understand as well as Peter.
And Peter doesn't understand as well as Paul.

There is an unfolding... a growing into this story and into this calling. There is a trajectory to
where the Bible is going and pointing to.

But here's the thing. ***The story of this people, this tribe, does not follow that trajectory in a
straight line.*** And so, as you move through the stories of the Bible, it's often three steps forward and two
steps backwards.

They move forward and they regress.
They wander off and get side tracked, and they are called back.
They misunderstand and they receive new guidance.

Some portions of the Bible are moving forward, some portions are pushing backward.

This is why Rene Girard calls it, “**A text in travail.**” I love that image. It's a text struggling
against itself, struggling for something to be born.

Remember what I said last week. The Bible is a library of stories, and letters, and poems, written
by around 40 different authors over the course of 1,500 years, in three languages, and three continents,
with different cultures forces, different economies, and politics, and psyches... and motivations, and
desires at work.

So of course they push against one another! That's why you can't pull one passage out, try to
figure out what it meant in that time, and then make a one-for-one, modern application.

That's what many of us have thought we're supposed to do, right? Understand what a passage
meant in its original context and then apply it to our context. But that's not how the Bible works!

You can't pull one piece out on its own and derive its fullest meaning.

Every passage, every portion, has to be read in relationship to the whole,
so that you can see if this is a story moving us forward,

or pushing us backwards. You have to see how it fits in the overall trajectory.

In other words, to read any portion well, you have to be able to recognize if this is a passage pushing back or moving us forward.

Or to stick with our “map” metaphor... does this road take us closer to where the map wants us to go... or does this road lead us into the dark wood of error?

Now if you’re still with me here, there is one really good question you might be asking: Why in the world would the Bible include roads that lead to error?

Or to put it another way:

Are you saying that some parts of the Bible are wrong?

Or to put it another way:

Why would we keep the parts that point in the wrong direction?

You were all asking that, right? I hope so, because here’s where all this starts to come alive. Remember what I said last week about the Bible being about you? How it is *your* story? About a mirror for your soul?

The Bible is an ancient library of poems, letters, and stories, that mirror your own life... ***that lays out the pattern of spiritual growth and development...*** and let’s be honest... none of us go in a straight line, right?

None of us move from doubt to faith to spiritual heroics in a constant forward movement toward perfection. No, we take three steps forward and two steps back. We think we’re following God’s voice and head down the wrong road.

I love the way Wendall Barry puts it in his novel *Jayber Crow*. The main character is looking back over his life and he says:

If you could do it, I suppose, it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line—starting, say, in the Dark Wood of Error, and proceeding by logical steps through Hell and Purgatory and into Heaven. Or you could take the King’s Highway past appropriately named dangers, toils, and snares, and finally cross the River of Death and enter the Celestial City. But that’s not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circle or a doubling back. I have been in the Dark Wood of Error any number of times. I have known something of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, but not always in that order. The names of many snares and dangers have been made known to me, but I have seen them only in looking back...”

This is what the spiritual journey looks like... and that’s exactly what the Bible is trying to help us see.

Life isn’t a straight line.

“It’s always getting the point and missing the point.

It’s God entering our lives and then [us] fighting it, [or] avoiding it, [or] running from it.” (Rohr)

And the Bible helps us to see that... to recognize that is exactly what we’re doing.

It’s a mirror of life... of your life, and my life, and our life together.

It helps us to recognize that we may just be enslaved in Egypt.

Or we might be lost in the wilderness...

Or we might think that those foreigners are the problem and if we just slaughter all of them, then everything will be OK... besides, we're special, we're God's beloved and He wants good things for us, right... forgetting that we're part of a tribe that is called to be a blessing for the whole world...
not just perpetuate our own tribe,
not just preserve our own well being.

Or we might think God is telling us to do something... that God would never tell us to do!

And that's the other story about Abraham I wanted to read to you today. Twenty-five years after Abraham's journey began, he had a son named Isaac... a son that was supposed to be the beginning of Abraham's blessing.

That little baby grows up into a young man... which leads us to this story in Genesis 22:1-14

[Read]

That's a pretty disturbing story, isn't it?

We don't like that story. In fact, it's this kind of story... and a whole lot of others like it, which we first read and think, "Geez, what's with the Bible? Why would anyone read this stuff and think they are supposed to follow?"

In fact, Rob Bell points out that a lot of people think of the Bible as a primitive, barbaric, book of fairy tales that we've moved way past. And so they ignore it, completely missing all the incredibly progressive and enlightened ideas that first enter human history and consciousness through the Bible.

"Ideas and ideals we still fall far short of, ideas and ideals that are still way ahead of our present consciousness and practice."

But people miss that when they disregard the whole thing.

"And then there are the folks who talk about how important, and central, and inspired the Bible is, but then butcher it with their stilted literalism and stifling interpretations, assuming that [each passage] says one thing and if you just get that one thing, then you've read it well."

But we are learning to read it in a different way... learning to ask different questions... questions like,

"How does this story fit in the overall direction, the trajectory of the Bible? Is this story moving us forward or pushing us backward?"

The question we're tempted to ask when we read a story like this is, "Why would God ask Abraham to do that?"

And it's a question we're tempted to ask again and again. Why would God do this or that? Why would God tell them to do that? Why did God..." fill in the blank.

But it's the wrong question! And it will often lead you down the wrong road.

The best question to ask is, ***"Why did they tell this story?"***

"Why did they write it down?"

And after you ask that question, maybe ask, "Why did this passage endure? Why is it so important?"

So, let's start there. Why did they tell this story?

Now to answer that question, let's go back to imagining you're still living in this pre-civilized tribal world... a world where your very life depended on the crops you could grow or the herd of animals you could cultivate. And here you are going to get a short lesson on the history of religion.

In that world, you'd want to do whatever you could to ensure a good crop and healthy herd... that means what happens with the weather is going to have a profound effect on your psyche.

The weather is completely unpredictable. Some years there is rain, some years there isn't. Some summers are hot and some are scorching. And it all feels completely random to you.

So you have a really good crop one year and a bad crop the next and wonder why.

And so the belief is born that there are these forces, some power, that is playing with you... a power you call "the gods." And you try to do everything you can to get on the gods good side.

So if you have a bad crop, you decide that the gods must have been mad at you for something. So the next year you make sacrifices to the gods, hoping that will get you on their good side.

But still, you had a bad year.

Which means you probably didn't sacrifice enough.

Or they didn't like your sacrifice.

And so you get a story like Cain and Abel, the first brothers. Remember, Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God. Cain's wasn't. Why? Well... I guess that's just how it goes...

But apparently what you've done isn't enough.

And all this leads to a word with which we are very familiar: anxiety.

Anxiety is deeply rooted religion...

But then let's say you have a really good year, lots of crops, and you think the gods must be happy with you. So you decide you better sacrifice some of that good crop to keep the gods on your side, to show them how grateful you are.

But how do you know how much?

And now you have it again, anxiety

Either way, you have this deep anxiety connected to religion...

an anxiety about trying to keep the gods on your side.

And so you keep giving more and sacrificing more... trying to keep them from cursing you...

And eventually what is the most precious thing you can sacrifice to appease the god?

Why... your child, of course.

Enter human sacrifice – into the human psyche.

So that's all in the backdrop of this story in Genesis 22.

Notice, when God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham doesn't ask any questions. I mean, you and I, I think we'd ask some questions.

But not Abraham. He just gets up and does it. *He knows what to do because this is what you do in his world.*

What's really surprising here is not that Abraham doesn't ask questions.

What is really surprising is what Abraham says to his servant that was traveling with him and Isaac. "Stay here," he says. "The boy and I (meaning Isaac) will go over there. We will worship, and then we will come back to you."

What? The boy's not coming back. That's not how this story is supposed to go.

But apparently, after decades of wrestling with this God, and learning to trust this God, Abraham's starting to figure some things out. This God must be up to something unexpected. Because Abraham has already seen God come through and God has provided when it seemed impossible.

And of course God is up to something. At just the last minute, God breaks through Abraham's ability to see his world differently, and stops this senseless act. God puts an end to this cycle... and God provides a ram instead.

After all, Abraham believes he has to sacrifice something.

So, God provides a different way... a way with which Abraham can connect.

In other words, this isn't a story where we read it and are supposed to think, "I guess I need to be willing to sacrifice one of my kids if God asks me." No! It's actually just the opposite.

This is a story where God is saying, "I am not that kind of God!!"

The others gods you've been chasing after might be like that,
but I am not that kind of God.

And the trajectory of the story moves forward!

So, why did they write this story down? Why has it been saved for generations? Because every generation struggles with this same tendency. We still do today... in all kinds of ways. We think:

If I just appease God... then God will protect me!

If I just give more or try harder... then God will like me!

If I just do the right things and follow the rules better... then God will answer my prayers!

But from the very beginning we have this story, this ancient, beautiful, and radically progressive story, that creates an earthquake in that kind of thinking, breaking open a huge crack right through the middle of it.

What the Bible is actually saying is, God is not like that!

Now do you see how easy it would be to read that wrong and come to some very awful conclusions? Especially if we didn't know what the overall trajectory of the Bible is like.

It would be really easy to read that wrong, if we didn't understand that this is a story written by people with a particular kind of worldview, wrestling with particular kinds of questions. There is this ancient story, that many of us think of as primitive and awful...because in many ways it is. And the story wants us to see that.

But it's also an incredibly progressive story...

a story that is so progressive,

we still don't live into where it wants to take us.

But the Bible wants us to see... that God isn't playing with you and your life.
God will provide... what you need most.
It might not be what you've imagined it would be.
But God will provide.

As Julian of Norwich put it, "All shall be well..."

So this is where we are so far:
The Bible is not an answer book.
And the Bible is not static. Not all parts are the same.

It's a story about a tribe of people, called to be a different kind of tribe, a tribe that blesses the world.

They will get that right and get it wrong. They will take three steps forward and two steps back as they move down the very messy road of trying to live out this calling... because that's what it looks like to be a human being stumbling after this mysterious God of ours.

And through all the twists and turns, there will be these amazing breakthroughs... of new insights... and the story will leap forward... but that still doesn't mean we've arrived.

The point is, the overall direction, it's driving us forward. It's taking us somewhere.

So stay with it. Keep reading it... and allow it to keep reading your own soul... and along the way your capacity for God will grow and deepen.

And every now and then...
something profound will break in on you...
something that opens you up,
and changes the way you see God and your world,
and shapes you into a fuller blessing
for the world... for all people,
the kind of blessing... God has created and called you to be.

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

"It is not that God has changed, or that the Hebrew God is a different God than the God of Jesus, it is that *we* are growing up as we move through the texts and deepen our experience. God does not change, but our readiness for such a God takes a long time to change." ~R. Rohr.