

Some time later God tested Abraham. He called to him, “Abraham!”

Abraham answered, “I am here.”

²God said, “Now take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains there, the one to which I direct you.”

³Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, along with Isaac his son. Abraham split the wood for the burnt offering. Then he set out to go to the place that God had told him about. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

⁵Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go on over there. We will worship, and then we will come back to you.” ⁶Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and loaded it on Isaac his son. He took the firepot and the knife in his hand. The two of them went on together.

⁷Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father?”

He said, “I am here, my son.”

He said, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

⁸Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them went on together. ⁹They came to the place that God had told him about. Abraham built the altar there. He arranged the wood, tied up Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. ¹⁰Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

¹¹The Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!”

Abraham said, “I am here.”

¹²He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

¹³Abraham looked around and saw that behind him there was a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴Abraham called the name of that place “The Lord Will Provide.” So it is said to this day, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

¹⁵The Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶and said, “I have sworn by myself, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will bless you greatly, and I will multiply your descendants greatly, like the stars of the sky and like the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the city gates of their enemies. ¹⁸In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” (EHV)

Theme: The Lord Provides a Substitute

The season of Lent is a season of repentance, a season of solemn contemplation and sorrow over our sins. We realize that we constantly fail to obey God’s commands and deserve nothing but rath and punishment. When we think about who we are and what we do we are filled with deep-felt sorrow and guilt.

Or maybe not. Sure, there are some, like Martin Luther was at times, who are filled with a deep depression and angst over their sins, but many of us aren’t filled with so much guilt and remorse. We live in a world that down-plays God’s Word and minimalizes sin and what sin deserves. And we as good Lutherans know full-well God’s grace! We are reminded of the Lord’s

undeserved love for us again and again, and we live and bask in that grace. How can we be filled with guilt when we know all our sins have been paid for by Christ? Plus, we are proud and arrogant, often thinking that we haven't done anything wrong—at least not bad enough to publicly confess. And so—because of all these reasons, even though Lent is a reason of repentance, we often struggle to repent with a decent amount of sincerity and truth.

So today we start where we should and look no farther than the first commandment. It was one of the first things you learned in confirmation class, and many of you are able to recite Luther's explanation by heart, "we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Love God above all things—that means you are to love God more than yourself, your job, sports, your favorite hobbies, your money and possessions, and even more than your family. Jesus says in Matthew 10, **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.**

Of course another aspect of the first commandment, other than love, is also trust. We trust in God above all things—even more than our reason or logic, or our feelings and emotions. We trust in God to keep his Word even if it seems impossible and all the evidence is to the contrary. So how exactly might loving and trusting in God above all things look like in our lives? We turn to Abraham in our text for today. God appeared to him and told him to go and sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah. Decades before this, God promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and would inhabit Canaan, and that all nations on earth would be blessed through him since the Savior of the entire world would come through his line. But all of these promises depended on one big thing—Abraham need to have a son and when God first gave this promise to him Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah, his wife, was 65 and barren. For 25 long years Abraham waited for Sarah to have a son, before Isaac was finally born. By the time our text for today takes place Isaac was grown; weren't not exactly sure how old he was at the time, but perhaps in early adolescence. And now, God wanted him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Technically at this time Abraham had another Son, Ishmael, with his wife's servant, Hagar. But in chapter 21 Abraham sent them away after God said to him, **the family line of your descendants will be traced through Isaac.**

So Isaac was the only son he had left, and the heir of the promise—and God wanted Abraham to kill him! What would you do? You'd you argue with God or bargain with him? Would you hesitate to go or just flat-out refuse? Abraham got up early the next morning and went on his way. He took Isaac, and donkey, and two servants with him along with wood and a fire, and they set out on a 50 mile journey. After three days, with the Mountain up ahead Abraham and Isaac finished the trip alone. They built an altar, and then Abraham bound his only son, tied him to the altar, took a knife, and raised his hand to kill him.

We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Abraham certainly did that. He loved God more than he loved his son, Isaac. He loved God more than he loved himself—how could God keep his promises if Isaac were put to death? The Writer to the Hebrews gives us insight into what was going on in Abraham's mind at the time, **He (Abraham) reasoned that God also had the ability to raise him (Isaac) from the dead.** Abraham also answered Isaac, when he asked about the animal for the sacrifice, **God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.** And he told his servants, **we will come back to you.** Not only did Abraham love God more than Isaac but he also trusted in God above all things—that God would still be able to keep his promises by raising Isaac from the dead after he was sacrificed by providing a substitute. Abraham is the example for us today. How well do you do following his example? Would you give up your child for the Lord, should he ask you to do so? And would you do so right away without complaining?

We'd like to answer 'yes' but we know that far too often the answer is 'no' because we choose far less important things over God all the time. When God required you to give something up:

time, friends, money, popularity, fun, family, out of love and loyalty to his Word, did you do it? Did you do it gladly and willingly? If God would ask you to give up your home, country, freedom, or all your possessions, would you get up early and do it, or would you complain and refuse to do so?

Right before he was going to kill Isaac, the Angel of the Lord called out to Abraham and stopped him. God, of course, knew Abraham's faith—he had already declared him righteous, or holy, through faith. And now, he proved to Abraham the faith that Abraham had in his own heart. Abraham was not only right in loving the Lord above all things, but also for trusting him above all things. Because God did indeed provide a lamb for the sacrifice, a ram was caught by its horns in a thicket, and so he offered it on the altar as a substitute for his son, Isaac. The Lord provides a substitute!

Do you know where Mount Moriah is, the Mountain on which all of this took place? At the time of Abraham, Mount Moriah stood above the ancient city of Salem, and later became part of the city of Jerusalem. It was there, on the same mountain, at the exact same place, over a thousand years later, that the Lord's temple was built.

And it was at that temple, day after day, year after year, that animals were offered as sacrifices to the Lord. These animals served as substitutes for the people. Their blood was shed on behalf of the people and the Lord forgave their sins. As the writer to the Hebrews says in chapter nine, **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.** It was one big cycle, people would sin, animals were sacrificed, and God would forgive the people—day after day, year after year. As Abraham said, **on the Mountain of the Lord, it (a substitutionary sacrifice) will be provided.** But the Writer to the Hebrews continues to make the point that the blood of animals really didn't forgive the sins of the people—if they did, they wouldn't have needed to offer up those sacrifices day after day and year after year. This never-ending cycle really served to remind the people of the seriousness of their sins. There had to be another sacrifice, another substitute who could actually take away the sins of the world.

Christ didn't serve as our substitute sacrifice on Mount Moriah, but on a hill nearby—outside of Jerusalem, called Golgotha, the place of the skull—or based on Latin, Mount Calvary. It was on the cross that Christ's substitutionary sacrifice took place. There our sins were placed on him and his perfect life was credited to us. By the shedding of his blood our sins have been covered, and we have been truly and fully forgiven. No more sacrifices are needed. The Writer to the Hebrews compares the sacrifices of the animals to Christ's in chapter 10, **In the one case, every priest stood ministering day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which are never able to remove sin. In the other case, this priest, after he offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.** Paul says in Romans 6, **For the death he died, he died to sin once and for all.**

For all. That means for you and for me—for all people of all time Christ died. He is truly is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Lamb without blemish or defect, who sacrificed himself in our place. Once again, the Lord provides a substitute!

The Lord gave a ram as a substitute for Isaac and reiterated his promises to Abraham to greatly bless him. God was gracious to Abraham because he feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things.

But you aren't Abraham. You often aren't willing to give up minor things for the Lord, let alone the things that you love. And if you aren't willing to give up your son for the Lord, then why would the Lord give up his one and only Son for you? But that is exactly what he did! For you—for all people of all time, God gave up his Son, and that Son willingly gave up his life to pay for your sins once and give you his perfect life. As Peter says in his first letter, **He himself carried our sins in his body on the tree so that we would be dead to sins and alive to**

righteousness. By his wounds you were healed. This recalls the famous prophecy of Isaiah 53, **It was because of our rebellion that he was pierced. He was crushed for the guilt our sins deserved. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.**

As Christians we do bask in the riches of God's grace. We know and we treasure Christ's sacrifice on the cross in our place; and we believe that we are fully and freely forgiven in Christ. And that's all the more reason to repent of our sins. We have a gracious God who loves us; but we respond to his love by selfishly disobeying him again and again. So we see how sinful we are, and we see how serious our sins are—serious enough for God to give up his one and only Son and serious enough that Christ would willingly shed his blood on the cross for our sins. And so we repent—in deep-felt sorrow and guilt we turn away from our sin and turn to the Lord for forgiveness. And so, we see that the season of Lent is a season of joyful repentance. We do not obey even the first commandment, but that is why God provides a substitute. And by Christ's sacrifice, our sins have been covered, his perfect life is ours, and eternal life is to come. Amen.