

“Mountains, Valleys, and Caves: Abram on Mount Moriah”

Asbury United Methodist Church

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By Pastor John Vick

- Church, it is great to be with you this morning. Happy New Year. Happy 2022. It is going to be a great year of “Helping Others Follow Jesus.”
- Just curious, how many of you have done this already over the past two days? (Show picture) You write the date and, for the year, accidentally write 2021. That’ll probably happen for a while. Maybe by February we’ll get it down.
- Now, not only is this the first Sunday of the new year, this is also the first Sunday of a brand new sermon series.
- We are so excited about this new series. In fact, it is one of the longest sermon series we’ve ever done. We’ve got some big hopes for this series.
- In it, we will take a journey through the ENTIRE Bible. And, we’ll do that through a unique perspective. We’ll be looking at the Scriptures through the lens of the mountains, valleys, and caves in the Holy Land that we read about in the Bible.
- Now, I’ve never been to the Holy Land before (I’ll be going in for the first time in February), but I have read Pastor Tom’s sermon journal. So, basically the same, right?
- Here’s what he said about mountains, valleys, and caves in the sermon journal: “The geography of the Holy Land is full of mountains, valleys and caves. Mountains provide great visibility. The high places allow us to discern location, find direction, and feel awe and inspiration. On the other hand, we

also have valleys. Not everything in life goes our way. Going through a valley often describes a troubling time. While not as frequent as mountains and valleys, the Holy Land also has caves. Caves are places of retreat, hiding and waiting.”

- And so, while we hope that you learn more about the Bible, and that your biblical understand grows, throughout this series, we also want to look at how we best walk through the highs and lows of life as Christians.
- Because we all experience highs and lows! We all walk through times of rejoicing, and times of weeping.

- Up here with me, I brought one of my favorite suits. It’s a custom, charcoal suit that was gifted to me a few years ago.
- I really like suits, and I enjoy wearing them, but here’s why I brought this up here with me.
 - This suit has seen a lot of highs, and a lot of lows. I’ve officiated many weddings in this suit (I’ve got another one coming up on Saturday) and been to many fun and fancy dinners in this suit. A lot of highs.
 - On the other hand, I’ve presided over many funerals in this suit as well. I’ve walked alongside of families having to say “goodbye” to their loved ones in this suit. A lot of lows.
- And so, again, our hope is to learn how to best walk through the highs and lows of life by looking at the Scriptures.

- And let me just say one more thing before we dive into our Scripture passage today. In Romans 12, we read: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

-If you are looking for a community that will walk through life with you, a community that will both celebrate with you AND cry with you, know that you've got one here at Asbury.

-We love you and want to be there for you, in the good times and the difficult times. The mountains, and the valleys.

- Alright, so we begin this series where the Bible begins: In the book of Genesis. Genesis literally means "beginnings."

-So in Genesis, God creates the heavens and the earth, and humankind. Yet, it doesn't take long for humankind to rebel against God. And so God sends the flood in hopes of redeeming humanity, but humanity rebels again. And again. And again.

-Yet, no matter how many times humanity rebels and turns against God, God still pursues people. God still seeks to redeem all people and all creation.

- And in Genesis 12, we see the fruition of the beginning of God's ultimate plan to redeem us.

-In Genesis 12, the specific Old Testament story begins. And it begins with a man named Abram, the person whose descendants God is going to use, to bless all nations.

-We'll be looking at a key moment in Abram's life today, found in Genesis 22.

-But, before we look at that event, let's have a brief overview of Abram's life up until that point.

- Now, bear with me. I know this is a lot of material, and I hope to communicate it in a way that makes sense and is relevant to us.

-But, again, it is a lot. I got a text from my Mom this week (who is an avid reader of the sermon journal), and she said: "Just

finished devotional time... Boy! How are you gonna fit all of Abraham's story into one sermon. LOL."

-I don't know, but here we go.

- In Genesis 12, God calls Abram to leave his home land, and go to a new land that God will show him. And, in doing so, Abram will receive a threefold blessing: He will have land, he will have numerous descendants, and that all nations will be blessed in him.

-Thankfully, Abram obeyed. The Scriptures say he went. He listened to and obeyed God.

- In Chapter 17 of Genesis, God reminds Abram of his covenant with him, and changes Abram's name.

-God says to him, "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."

-The name change was significant, as Abraham literally means "father of a multitude," which was God's promise to Abraham – that he would be the father of a multitude of nations.

- Now, over the decades, though, of hearing God say that he would make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, Abraham got a little impatient.

-He kept hearing one thing, but was seeing something else. He kept hearing the promise of children, but was childless. So, what did Abraham do?

-He got "ahead of" God and had a child with his younger servant, Hagar. They have a child, named Ishmael, but this is not the child that God was to establish a covenant with.

- That child arrives in Genesis 21. His name is Isaac, and he is the son of Abraham and his wife, Sarah.
 - After the birth of Isaac, the child of promise, Ishmael and his mom (Hagar) are sent away.
 - That leaves Abraham and Sarah with only one child, Isaac, the one who will become a great nation.
 - So, that sets up our text for the day. After decades of waiting, and after an incident of becoming impatient, Abraham and Sarah finally have their son, Isaac, the child of promise.

- Let me just say one more thing about Abraham before we dive into our Scripture reading. Repeatedly throughout these chapters, we are reminded of Abraham's age.
 - That's kind of different than today, when you really don't talk or ask about people's age.
 - When God called Abraham in Genesis 12, he was 75 years old. When Ishmael was born, Abraham was 86 years old. When God gave him the sign of the covenant, Abraham was 99 years old. And when Isaac was born, Abraham was 100 years old.

- Isn't that wonderful? That Abraham, the "father of a multitude of nations," the one whom God chose to bless all of the nations through, he was SEVENTY FIVE when we're first introduced to him!
 - And, he is 100, when the son that all of his descendants will come through is born.
 - That greatly encourages me, knowing that age is not a barrier or hinderance to being used by God. All that we read about in Abraham's life, happened after he was $\frac{3}{4}$ of a century old.

- And here at Asbury, whether you're closer to the age of Isaac or Abraham, we want you to know that the Lord can and will do great works through you.

- I come from this with a little different perspective. For a while, I served as the youngest Methodist pastor in our conference.

- And even though there were some people who tried to downplay my ministry, I knew that the Lord had called me! And that the Lord was doing great works through me.

- Story of Getting Wedding Credentials at Courthouse

- Also, intern, real pastor, paid story

- And I love how we celebrate and validate the ministry of people who are both very young, and not very young here at Asbury.

- Age wasn't a hinderance in the Lord using Abraham. And age shouldn't be a hinderance in the Lord using us today.

- Alright, with all of that being said, let's look at our passage of Scripture for today.

- We're in Genesis 22, reading verses 1-14. If you don't have a Bible with you, there are pew Bibles beneath you. This passage is found on page 19 in them.

- Out of the reverence we have in our hearts for the Word of God, let's stand together.

- And, since this is a longer passage of Scripture, I will read the bulk of it by myself.

- But, three times in this passage, Abraham says, "Here I am." He says it first to God, then to Isaac, then to the Angel of the Lord.

-So, while we're reading, each time Abraham says, "Here I am," you all will read that out loud. Sound like a plan?

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "**Here I am.**" 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 of which I shall tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy[a] will go over there and worship and come again to you." 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "**Here I am,** my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

9 When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "**Here I am.**" 12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing

you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called the name of that place, “The Lord will provide”;[b] as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

- Alright, what a story! Whether you’ve heard that story a million times – or this was your first time – this story can be a little perplexing, and even cause us to squirm a little bit.
- I think this passage can be a challenging one for two primary reasons.

1) It involves child sacrifice. That’s certainly implied when God says, “Offer Isaac there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

-Now, throughout the Old Testament, the practice of child sacrifice is forbidden. It is condemned by the law and prophets.

-There’s just something deep within us, when we think of this concept, that says, “This isn’t right.”

-And so, since that is an element in this passage, some people have trouble with it.

2) And second, this passage portrays the notion that God tests us.

-That’s seen in literally the first verse, which says, “After these things, God tested Abraham.”

-Thus, the readers (but not Abraham) know this is a test from the very beginning. And, to be honest, this notion of God testing us is one we don’t like much today.

-I think **D. Stuart Briscoe** says it best: “Modern man, if he believes in God, has a tendency to think of the God in Whom he believes as a benevolent figure Whose main concern is to make man feel good about himself. This God is regarded as something like the recreational director on a cruise ship whose task is to give everyone a good time with no expense spared. The idea that God might initiate a test is therefore foreign to many people both outside and inside the Kingdom.”

- So really, for us to best understand this text, I think we need to re-evaluate the way that we perceive tests.

-Tests aren't bad or negative things God does to punish His people. Instead, the Bible sees tests as opportunities to grow in our faith. Here is what James, the brother of Jesus, wrote in the New Testament:

-“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”

- Alright, so let's look at Abraham in our text today. It doesn't say how old he is, but we can safely say that he is well over 100 years old. He was 100 years old when Isaac was born, and Isaac here is old enough to help his father carry the wood for the offering up the mountain.

-But could you imagine the emotions Abraham was experiencing? Or the confusion?

- For decades now, God was saying that he would make of him a great nation, and for years Abraham was waiting for this child. And now, after the child is finally here, God calls Abraham to offer up “his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loves.”

- Yet, what is so amazing, is that Abraham obeys. He says, “Here I am.” And he does what God calls him to do.
- He is obedient. And Abraham’s obedience is grounded in trust.
- Terence Fretheim** says it well: “Abraham obeys because he trusts God; trust out of which obedience flows remains basic. Disobedience would reveal a lack of trust... Abraham’s obedience is informed and undergirded by a trust that God will find a way through this dark time.”
- Thus, on this mountain top – even with the future being unknown – Abraham trusted in God. And, because he trusted in God, he could say “Yes” to him.
- I have three things I’d like to emphasize this morning about Abraham’s trust in God on the mountain.

① On the Mountain, Abraham trusted God’s faithfulness.

- God had never let Abraham down before – and Abraham knew that God wasn’t about to start now.
- Abraham could look back on key moments in his life – such as when God called him, or protected him, or gave him Isaac, and so on – and remember the faithful presence of God all throughout his life.
- There’s a song that I’ve been listening to lately, and I think it really gets to the heart of this idea of trusting God’s faithfulness.
- The song is called, “My God is Still the Same.” The chorus goes: “When did He break His promise? When did His kindness fail? Never has, never will My God is still the same; When did He lose His power? When did His mercy change? Never has, never will My God is still the same, yeah My God is still the same.”

-And, if Abraham had K-LOVE Radio back then, I think he'd be singing this song as well.

-In the mountains, and in the valleys, of Abraham's life, God had been faithful. God had watched over, protected, and blessed Abraham.

-So, here in this story, Abraham could trust that the same God who had always been with him, would continue to be with him.

- And so, my friends, how have you seen God demonstrate His faithfulness towards you?

-When I look back at my life, I am truly amazed to see how God watched over me, and guided me, every step of the way.

-I was in the 8th grade when I felt the calling to be a pastor. I didn't know exactly what the journey would look like, but I knew that God was calling me.

-God was so faithful in placing certain people in my life to pour into me and help me grow in my calling to be a pastor.

-And God was so faithful, as I was growing in my calling, in giving me opportunities to practice and grow in my gifts.

- I was even able to travel to different small churches around the state as a high schooler and preach on Sundays.

-And let me tell you, there were some small churches...

(Picture)

-But, God was faithful then, and God was faithful every step of the way on this journey, and God is faithful now!

-Friends, remember that God is faithful.

② Abraham trusted God's ability to provide.

-That's a very important theme from our text today. Do you remember what Abraham says to Isaac in verse 8, as they're

walking up the mountain and Isaac asks about a lamb for the burnt offering?

-Abraham says, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Even before God had provided the lamb, Abraham was trusting in God’s provision.

- The author of Hebrews, written in the New Testament, much later, says this about Abraham’s faith in God’s provision and power:

-“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

-Abraham trusted God so much – and believed that, if it came down to it, God could even raise Isaac from the dead.

- And, after God does provide the ram for the offering, do you remember what Abraham does?

-He names the mountain, “The Lord will provide.” God is truly Jireh – He is the one who provides for his people.

-That’s at the heart of who God is – He is provider. Each Sunday, in the prayer that Jesus himself taught us to pray, we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Our God provides.

- Story of Megan and her asking, “Do you really think God can do this?”

-Friends, our God provides. He provided for Abraham, and He provides for us today.

-The final thought I want to share today, is my favorite one. I always say, if I were ever to write a book, I would write it over this concept.

③ Abraham trusted God's friendship.

-I have a Bible trivia question for you! Do you know what name is given to Abraham repeatedly throughout the Bible, both in the Old and New Testament?

-“Friend of God.” Abraham was a friend of God. They had a close, personal relationship. They knew each other! They talked!

- And so, the person who asked Abraham to offer up his only son whom he loved wasn't a stranger. Wasn't a mean or vindictive person. It wasn't someone who was angry at Abraham or wanted to see him fail.

-No, the person who asked Abraham to offer up his only son was the One who loved Abraham more than he could ever imagine. The One who knew Abraham before he was even born.

-The One who asked Abraham to offer up his son, was His friend.

- There was a lot unknown to Abraham in this story. There wasn't a lot of clarity.

-The why was never explained, God didn't say why Abraham was to do this. The where wasn't given until later, God just said

“Go to the land of Moriah and there I'll tell you which mountain.” The when was unclear, as God didn't give a time or date for the offering.

- Yet, even with all of those unknowns, the WHO was known. It was God. It was Abraham's friend, who was calling him.
- And really, knowing the WHO is the most important part of any invitation.

- Here's a few brief, silly examples.

- The invitation, "Hey, do you need a ride?" If my friend asked me that, of course I'd say yes! But, if a random stranger asked me that, that'd be a hard pass.
- Or what about, "Hey John, God really wanted me to tell you this." Now, if this person is very serious in their faith, active in prayer and Scripture reading, I'll definitely listen. But, if they aren't bearing the fruit of the Spirit and being active in prayer and Scripture reading, I doubt it's the Lord they're hearing.
- What about, "Would you like some sushi?" If a sushi restaurant waiter asked me that, definitely! But, if the convenient store clerk asked me that, no way.
- Now, I know that was kinda silly, but what made the difference in each of those scenarios? It was the person asking me! The invitation each time was the same, but what made the difference was the character and qualifications of the person inviting me.
- And so, church, God is calling each of us to trust Him. That's our theme today: trusting God.
- And the thing is, we aren't being asked to trust some random stranger. We aren't being asked to place our trust in a being who is angry or deceitful or out to get us.
- Instead, each of us are invited to place our trust in God, the One who loves us, the One who calls us friend.

- I'll end by sharing this story from Genesis 15, as I think it illustrates the friendship of Abraham and God so well.
- In that chapter, Abraham (or, Abram at the time) is in his tent, and the Lord comes to Abraham.
- We read that the Lord brought Abraham outside, and said to him, "Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your descendants be."
- You know, I've been reading the Bible every day for so many years now, and that remains one of my favorite pictures/images in all of the Bible.
- If you're an artist, that would be a cool scene to draw! But here in this story, we have Abraham and God, two friends, stargazing together.

- And later on in the New Testament, before Jesus breaks the bread with his disciples, during the last week of his life, he calls his disciples his friends as well.
- And so, as we get ready to come to the Lord's table, as we get ready to put our trust in Him once again, remember:
- The God who is faithful, the God who is able to provide, also calls us friend.
- You are invited to His table today, not as strangers, but as friends. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.