

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



## **“Fit to be Tied”**

**A sermon by Candice Ryals Provey**

**13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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**Genesis 22:1–18**

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This is not the first time that Abraham has been called by God. Some of you may remember, back in chapter twelve, the first time that God spoke to Abraham. The call went something like this: “Get going! From your land, from your birthplace, from your father’s house, to a land that I will show to you.” It came along with many promises of progeny and land: “I will make of you a great nation, and all the world will be blessed.” This three-fold layering of the call becomes more specific with each repetition, slowly honing in on the heart of the matter—Go from your land, Go from your birthplace, Go from your father’s house.

It was a risky venture for Abraham, that first call, and this last call echoes that familiar pattern—Take your son, your only one, whom you love, and finally, Isaac, and Get going! That is the word of Abraham’s call: Get going! You can hear as it narrows in again—Take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac—as if each repetition is twisting God’s point deeper into Abraham’s heart.

The rabbis have a classic midrash on this scene. If you aren’t familiar with midrash, it is an imaginative way of engaging with the text, questioning and expanding it through storytelling. A classic example stretches this call into a dialogue between God and Abraham. The rabbis hear Abraham responding to God’s call, “Take your son,” with “Which one?” And when God says, “Your only one,” Abraham says, “I have two sons.” And when God says, “The one you love,” Abraham retorts, “I love both my sons!”

The rabbis imagine this older, wiser Abraham, who is now familiar with the pattern, dodging God's call at every breath. And we, even centuries later, continue to try to dodge this text. The historical critics analyze the context of the Ancient Near East and suggest that child sacrifice was a common practice. They describe this story as a departure from the cultural norm toward a more ethical practice of religion. While this is probably accurate, and gives us temporary relief, it is ultimately insufficient.

This is the sort of text that snatches you in the middle of the night, that you wrestle and grapple with for the rest of your life, and you don't walk away from it the same. It is the type of text that leaves you limping. The questions it evokes are haunting—How could God ask such a thing of Abraham? How could Abraham concede? They haunt us every time we read it. These are the questions we will grapple with today.

The call does not come out of nowhere, but *after these things*. It comes after the betrayal in the garden that God planted and Cain murders brother Abel, after the covenant with Noah turns sour just a few verses following the restoration of creation, after that business with Babel and Sodom and Gomorrah, who are so arrogant and overfed and unconcerned. It comes after these things that God tests Abraham. Ellen Davis observes that God needs to have faith in Abraham as much as Abraham needs to have faith in God, that only a wounded God, badly burned by humankind and all of their unfaithfulness and desperate to trust again, would ask for something like this.

Even Abraham himself has a bit of a spotty history. He starts out well, courageously setting out at God's first call, and God's new experiment of redemption. But after decades of wandering and famine and drought, Abraham starts to look out for himself. He passes Sarah off as his sister, not once but twice, to get a leg up in a new place. Ishmael is born out of Abraham and Sarah's impatience with God and the fulfillment of God's promise.

After these things, God tests Abraham, because despite all of it, God has gifted Abraham and Sarah with a son, Isaac. God has pledged that, through Isaac, all the world will be blessed and God will make of them a great nation. And now, God is

asking Abraham, “Will you trust me with the gift? Will you trust me with the promise?” Shockingly, despite all of our apprehension, Abraham does.

It seems as if, after these things, Abraham has learned to rely upon God. After God’s initial call and grand promises. After God delivers Abraham and Sarah, not once but twice, from Abraham’s poor choices. After God reiterates the promise and cuts a covenant with Abraham in the wilderness. And finally, after God calls the seed of Abraham into existence, despite Abraham’s old age and the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. God gifts them with the life of Isaac in fulfillment of the promise. After all these things, Abraham has learned to rely upon God, who gives life to the dead.

It may sound easy, but we know that it’s not, and the rest of the story unfolds the horrific picture of Abraham’s faithfulness, Abraham’s trust. This past week in Vacation Church School, the kids have been learning about the story of Jonah, who gets tossed overboard in the midst of the great storm and spends the next three days praying in the belly of the big fish. That story helps shed some light on what’s happening with Abraham here. We see Abraham wake up early in the morning and go about the tasks of chopping wood, saddling the donkey, setting out. He seems to be numb, going through the mechanical motions required, as he sinks into a chaotic sea of emotion. And the next three days are just swallowed up! They are shrouded in darkness and silence.

Then the story shifts from fast-forward—three days gone in a breath—to painful slow motion, waiting with anticipation and apprehension as they draw near to the place and the details unfold. We are left with this poignant scene of Abraham and his son walking along together. At this point it is worth noting that we know very little about Isaac, nothing at all aside from the miracle of his birth.

Some of the rabbis suggest that Isaac was about ten years old at the time. After spending a full week with fourth-graders at Vacation Church School, I imagine Isaac would have been asking more questions—Where is the lamb? How much farther? Do I have to carry this? When is lunch? Can I eat my snack now? And if that is the case, I imagine Abraham would have been savoring, cherishing every

word. He is probably wishing for endless days filled with inane questions and praying, Lord, have mercy!

Others suggest that Isaac was older, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old, in an attempt to ease the horror of the scene by claiming that Isaac was older, and therefore complicit, willing. But after seeing our Durham Summer Service students at the concert last night, and thinking about our recent high school graduates with their exciting plans, I don't think it helps at all. Thinking about Isaac, who is trying to be brave, who is anxious to serve and to help, who wants to make his father proud, there is nothing to say but Lord, have mercy!

More than words can capture, Rembrandt's portrait of this scene expresses so much. In his younger years, he paints a very dramatic scene of impending slaughter in bold colors. But twenty years later, after he had lost three of his own children to illness, he revisits this scene in an etching. You see Abraham cradling Isaac's head gently in his lap, with his hand covering Isaac's eyes, protecting him. And behind him, the angel of the Lord cradles Abraham in a similar fashion. More striking than anything else in the etching is Abraham's face—it is wasted, his eyes hollowed out like caves, his cheeks sunken. You can see the full cost of what his obedience, his trust, his faithfulness has cost him.

And in those lines of pain etched into his face, we also see the pain of our God. You can see the depth of God's love for Israel, like the prophet Hosea voices in chapter eleven: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son... it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms... I led them with cords of kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."

For God so loved Israel, God so loved the world, that God gave God's only son. And when God's people demanded his life with their shouts, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" God conceded. Yet even then, God could be trusted with the

promise, and even now, God can be trusted with the promise. In the death and resurrection of Christ, God is still fulfilling the promise! This is what Paul is talking about in chapter four of Romans—he is arguing that the promises are not inherited through blood alone, or through the law, but through faith.

Christ's faithfulness and our faith in Christ make us Abraham's seed in the world. Gentiles are welcomed into God's covenant with Israel, and Abraham becomes the father of many nations. We become inheritors of the promise and of this trial as well. And this is what it means to be Abraham's seed in the world: we believe and trust in God's promises, even when we can't imagine how they could possibly be fulfilled, even when it costs us more than we can bear!

We trust in and cling to God's promises, and we cling to each other. We come here to hold hands and walk on together down this risky and reckless path of faith. We also bring our children. We bind them into the covenant in baptism, because we want them to know the fierce love of God. We pray for them to be set aflame with the Spirit of Pentecost, so that they might proclaim the good news through their own lives. We invite and welcome them into discipleship, a journey filled with promise and costing nothing less than everything.