

Today we begin a new sermon series on Heroes of the Old Testament. I gave you a taste of the series a couple weeks back with David and Goliath. Today it's Abraham.

The logical place to begin would be with Noah, he's one of the first heroes way back in Genesis 6, but I'm waiting for Dave and Joan Lindsay to return...
READ Genesis 22

While preparing the bulletins for today Sharon, the church secretary, told me she was giving the sermon at her church this morning (Four Square)-- She said, "Since it's Mother's day I'm going to talk about all the amazing women in the Bible, both named and unnamed!")

And I thought, "Oh... " I didn't even think about that! I didn't think about Mother's day when planning for today's sermon! In fact, can you think of a worse passage for a sermon on Mother's day than Genesis 22, the story of God calling Abraham to SACRIFICE HIS SON???

I, frankly, cannot.

I almost changed the passage (and my hero) to something more pleasant, more peaceful, more KID FRIENDLY.

I deliberated for a long time about changing the story to something else for our sermon today.

And then it dawned on me. That is what this story is about. All of us want to change the story. This story asks us, can we trust God with the story? Can we trust God as God's story plays itself out in God's word and throughout our lives. God has a story to tell, God has a story for us to live. I don't know about you, but there are times I want to change the story God has planned.

When God told Abraham to go up the mountain, I want them to go on a joyful mountain hike. I want them to laugh and to play and to have good conversation, you know, sit around the campfire chanting "Going on a Bear Hunt." God had another plan, which went far beyond the personal stories of Abraham and Isaac-. God had a world to save and Abraham was a key player...

What I find most fascinating about Abraham as we read about how he hiked up that mountain is that Abraham asked no question, there was no debate, there was no wavering with him whatsoever... God tested and Abraham obeyed. Abraham trusted. Abraham was ready to do exactly what God wanted him to do.

Three times in the passage Abraham responded with, "Here I am." He said it to God, he said it to Isaac, he said it to God again.

The way it's written, Abraham doesn't seem to have any emotion about the circumstance whatsoever. Who is full of emotion? Me, you! The reader! Because we can't possibly imagine being willing and able to carry out what God was calling him to do. (kill his son!)

There are a couple of reasons for that

1- The Lord's command here seems so contrary to the good and loving God we worship. God loves children, God loves families. The Lord isn't like the pagan gods who demand child sacrifices... OUR GOD IS GOOD.

2- What God called Abraham to do was contrary to God's plan, wasn't it? The story God had

laid out for Abraham began with a promise, the promise of the nation of Israel being established by Abraham's lineage. Isaac was a key part of that, to keep the generations going. Why would God call it quits on his own promise?

So there were so many questions. Perhaps Abraham had these questions rolling around in his head as he climbed that mountain. Unfortunately the passage doesn't allow us to read his mind.

What we do know is that when Isaac asked his question that cuts to our hearts, "Father, we have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "The Lord will provide."

THE LORD WILL PROVIDE.

Did Abraham had an inkling that at the last second the angels would intervene and say, "Wait! Stop!" Did he know his son would of course be spared?

All we know is God gave Abraham this promise in the very beginning. God would use him and his family to establish the nation of Israel.

Abraham trusted God-- He trusted God to be good, and that God would fulfill his promise. THE LORD WILL PROVIDE.

Lest we put Abraham on this pedestal of unwavering, unimaginable, almost UNHUMAN faith, we have to realize, it wasn't always this way for Abraham. There were a whole series of circumstances and events that led him to this place of honored faith.

In the beginning, Abraham wrestled with the same problem I/we wrestle with that I mentioned earlier. ABRAHAM WANTED TO BE IN CHARGE OF THE STORY. God had God's story and God's promise, and Abraham had his own plan of how to carry it out. So did Sarah. So did Lot, Abraham's brother!

I want to spend a few moments recapping the ways they intervened to try to take charge of God's story

1st off, Abraham. First, listen to the promise Abraham received from the Lord, the famous promise of Genesis 12:13:

"Go from your country, your people, and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (when he was 75 years old!!!)

So Abraham received this amazing promise and we think he went out like the little boy on the beach I mentioned last week, "Charge!" into the unknown for God, but actually Abraham set out FULL OF FEAR Because a famine in the land meant they had to live in Egypt.

Apparently, Sarai was an amazingly beautiful woman (at 65!) Abram was so afraid that the Pharaoh would kill Abraham to have Sarai as his wife that he told Sara, "say you are MY SISTER INSTEAD OF MY WIFE!"

This was Abraham's plan... he just received God's promise of a future reality BUT HE ALSO HAD THAT "What if" Scenario gripping him with fear and doubt in front of his eyes...

Sarai went along with Abraham's plan and Pharaoh did take Sarai as his wife... But this of course wasn't God's plan so God inflicted the Pharaoh and his family with horrible diseases UNTIL Pharaoh confronted Abraham and kicked he and Sarai out of Egypt.

That was scene one.

(How's Ab doing on the whole "God will provide at this point? Thumbs down)

Abraham's "what if" worries caused him to want to change the story.

With Lot, he wrote the "what's in it for me?" version of the story.

In Ch. 13: Abraham and Lot divided the land of Bethel between them, and Abraham gave Lot his first choice. Lot took the lush green land on the side of Sodom and Gomorrah...

Do the words, "Sodom and Gomorrah" mean anything to you?

Yes, the land was lush and beautiful, full of grass for livestock and produce to eat... but it was also full of wickedness- the effect of that wickedness certainly wreaked havoc on Abraham's journey...

We can say Lot didn't know Sodom and Gom was such a bad place, but we don't get any clues he consulted God about it, which is what Abraham did in 13:4

Moving on to Sarai:

With Sarai, she was caught up in the "God's plan isn't working so I'm going to have to help him out" version of the story.

SARAI

God continued to reiterate his promise to Abraham that he'd be the father of a great nation, but Sarai was getting older and there was no sign of a child! Hear Sarah's answer: Read 16:2 "...so she said to Abram, 'The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my servant; perhaps I can build a family through her.'"

It's that, God's not helping us, SO WHY DON'T WE HELP GOD OUT WITH OUR OWN PLAN?!"

Next line (16:2): "Abram agreed to what Sarai said."

(What do you think about Sarai's plan?)

When Hagar conceived Ishmael with Abraham as the father, do you think Sarai was happy?

No. Sarai hated Hagar and told Abraham, "you are responsible for my suffering!"

Sarai mistreated Hagar, Hagar ran away. The Lord took care of Hagar and spoke promises over her and her son Ishmael...

Abraham, Lot, Sarai, EVERYONE Intervened TO MANIPULATE GOD'S STORY TO THEIR OWN ENDS... it brought so much hurt, so much destruction, broken relationships, family drama.

- I often wonder, if everyone else didn't get in the way with their own plans and attempts at self preservation, I wonder if Sarah would've been able to conceive much, much earlier in the story? And I wonder if all the heartache would've been avoided?

The wonderful thing is, THIS WAS GOD'S STORY. As much as the others thought they were in charge or wanted to be in charge of the story, God continued to be God in charge of the story. The Lord continued to be faithful and true to his promises throughout, regardless of everyone else's lack of faith.

What Abraham was able to see and learn was that GOD HAD PROVIDED. And GOD WAS FAITHFUL.

--The Lord rescued them from the wickedness and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.
--The Lord rescued Sarah when Abraham allowed her to be the wife of another (not just once, but TWO TIMES HE DID THIS!-- once w/ Pharoah of Egypt in ch. 12, again w/ King Abimelech of Gerrar in ch. 20!
--The Lord brought Sarah the son Isaac, just as he had promised Abraham and Sarah.

And so, back to Genesis 22...there was Abraham, climbing up that mountain. Just he and God, and Isaac, his promised son. Sarah wasn't there, Lot wasn't there, there was No Pharoah or Abimilech-- no one who could intervene with God's story, except Abraham.

What we celebrate today is that Abraham had come to the place in his life, in his faith, where he was able to say, "Yes, the Lord will provide." -Just as God had done in the past. Just as God was going to provide in his future.

Where do you find yourself in the story? Can you trust God with the story you are in right now? If you are honest, can you see ways you are tempted to change/alter/intervene in ways that disrupt the story God has for you?

On the way here I was thinking about my own life, and had to admit that I am like Abraham, consumed with the "what ifs" that make me try to do all that I can to ensure everything will come out in my favor. I want to manipulate circumstances so my kids will make the right choices and even find the right husband (I've got that all figured out for them even at age 13!) which is so silly, because what ultimately am I really in control of anyway?

This isn't just a question for us to ask ourselves individually. There is a bigger question, and that is the question we must ask ourselves as a Church Body. What is the story God has for us here at Community Presbyterian Church? In what ways is the Lord calling us to participate in his grand story that proclaims God's salvation for the world? Are there ways we are tempted to make the story solely about us and what we desire for ourselves?

May we follow Abraham's lead in being willing to sacrifice everything we hold dear to experience and know the Lord as the one who provides.