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**A: Pentecost 5
Genesis 22:1-14**

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“The Definition of Faith”

“God said [to Abraham], ‘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 that I shall show you,’”

“Abraham!”

He knew that voice!

It was the voice of God, the voice that had come to him when he was 75 years old,
the voice that had promised him his heart’s desire.

Up until that point he had had little cause to complain.

His life had been good, he had had plenty, and he had married Sarai, the woman he loved.

The only thing they had lacked was a child.

He could, of course, have divorced Sarai and married another; heck, he could have just married a second wife!

But he couldn’t do that to his beloved Sarai.

And so they had borne the pain together, and eventually they had come to accept the reality
that they would never have the child for which they so longed.

And then, at the ripe old age of 75, God had spoken to him!

Yes! The God of all creation had spoken to him, Abram!

And he hadn’t just spoken, he had made a promise to Abram –
an unbelievable, incredible, unimaginable promise!

God had told him to leave their country, their home, their families
and go to some land that God would show them.

And before Abram could even form objections in his mind,

God continued to speak, promising to make him into a great nation –
a nation so great that all the peoples on earth would be blessed through him!

The promise was so big he couldn’t even wrap his mind around it, but one thing he did get:
the first step God would have to take to make him into a great nation
would be to give them that long desired child!

He knew it was crazy.

After all he was 75 years old and his wife was 65, and yet he knew in his heart that it was God who had spoken,
it was God who had promised,

it was God who would give them the deepest desire of their hearts.

And so at age 75 he picked up and left their families, their home, and their country
for some unknown land that God promised to show them.

The journey was long and arduous and they faced many challenges along the way, including famine and war.
Days and weeks and months and years passed, and there was still no child.

Finally after 11 years had passed, it came to Sarai that the promise God had made
had been to Abram and not to her.

She so wanted Abram to have a child and she so wanted the promise God had made him to come true!

And she didn’t want to be the one in the way!

And so finally, she convinced Abram to have a child with her maid.

It took a lot to persuade him, but he finally agreed that perhaps she was right,
perhaps that’s what God had meant to happen.

As much as it hurt him, and as much as it worried him about what it might do to his relationship with Sarai,
he finally agreed and took Hagar, and she bore him a son, Ishmael.

At first, there was joy.

But something had happened between him and Sarai, and try as he might, he just couldn't make it right.

In his distress, he called out to God and God showed up again,

not only reassuring Abram of the promise, but making an even greater promise to him:

God changed his name from Abram, meaning "Father of a Great Nation",

to Abraham meaning "Father of Many Nations".

And this time God made a promise to Sarai, too.

God changed her name from Sarai, meaning "My Princess" confined to Abraham's family,

to Sarah, meaning "Princess of Peoples".

God's first promise to Abram required him to leave his country, home, and kindred.

The second promise required what might be considered even more:

God asked Abraham to circumcise himself and every male member of his household.

This 2nd promise to both Abraham and Sarah was confirmed when three strangers stopped by for a visit.

By that time Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was 89.

The strangers prophesied that Sarah would give birth to a son within the year.

Overhearing this absurd promise Sarah laughed. But within the year she gave birth to Isaac.

Once Isaac was born, there was no need to have the elder Ishmael around,

and Sarah made it plain she wanted Hagar and Ishmael gone.

It broke Abraham's heart to send them away, but what else could he do? And so he sent away his first born.

Several more years passed & things pretty much returned to normal between Abraham & Sarah,

whose lives were completely centered around this child of promise.

They were so grateful. They felt so blessed. Nothing had ever meant more to them than this child.

And then came the worst day of Abraham's life.

God spoke to him again and said, "Go! Take your ONLY son

(which was the truly the case now that Abraham had cast out Ishmael!), the son you love,

and go to a mountain I will show you and sacrifice him."

This God, who in Abraham's old age had promised him a child,

this God, who had led him for the last 30 years,

this God, who had fulfilled his promise and worked this unimaginable miracle

of giving Sarah and him a child when he was 100 years old and she was 90,

this God, who had taken so long, but who had fulfilled the promise, was now about to snatch it away!

How could that be? It didn't make any sense.

But Abraham knew God's voice.

And even though his heart was filled with fear and doubt,

underneath that fear and doubt was a baseline of trust and faith that the God who had given him Isaac

deserved to be trusted, deserved to be followed, deserved to be obeyed.

Those were the longest three days of his life.

And throughout that whole journey, Abraham didn't hear a single word from God.

He laid the wood for the fire. He bound Isaac. He laid him on the altar.

And he took the knife and he raised it above his son's heart....

And right before he brought it down, God spoke!

And God said, "Do not touch the boy, for now I know that you love me

more than you love the gift I gave you."

And when Abraham looked up, he saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns.

This is one of the most important stories in the Bible, because it describes the absurdity of faith.

Faith is not rational or reasonable.

Faith has nothing to do with human wisdom or knowledge or common sense.

Faith has nothing to do with following moral principles.

I'm going to say those again, because this is crucial to understanding what God wants from us.

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Faith has nothing to do with human wisdom or knowledge or common sense.

Faith has nothing to do with following moral principles.

Faith means one thing, and one thing alone.

It means trusting God and obeying God and following God, no matter what.

Doing the rational or reasonable, does not require faith.

Operating with human wisdom, and knowledge and common sense does not take faith Following moral principles does not take faith.

What takes faith is doing whatever God says, no matter how absurd or ludicrous or ridiculous.

What takes faith is realizing that as smart as we think we are,

we can't see beyond our limited vision, or beyond the present moment, the way God can,

since God can see, not only us & the people with whom we are connected,

but God can see beyond those people to the impact we will have on people we may not even know yet,

and God can see beyond the present moment to know how our present actions will affect the future.

What takes faith is following God on what seems to be the wrong road that will lead to death and destruction.

What takes faith is being willing to give up everything we love, everything we care about,

everything we hold dear – even the most precious things that God himself has given us.

That's why we are here.

We are not here to maintain a human organization or a social club.

We are not here to perform rituals meant to appease some distant god.

We are not here to be a helpful social service organization.

We are not even here to be an advocacy group for social justice.

We are here for one reason – to go on a faith journey with the God of the universe,

the God who loves each and every one of us as much as he loved Abraham and Sarah.

God knows the deepest desires of our hearts, because God has planted those deepest desires.

God wants to fulfill those desires for each and every one of us.

But God is more than the Ultimate Vending Machine.

As much as God loves to pour out blessings on us,

God doesn't want us to love the gifts more than we love the Giver!

The first and greatest commandment is,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,

and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

That's the first and greatest commandment,

and the only way we can do that is to put God first, and to trust and obey and follow

no matter how absurd, no matter how ludicrous, no matter how ridiculous–& no matter what it may cost us.

This life journey that we are on is simply a journey of faith in the midst of doubt,

a journey on which God calls us, a journey by which God tests and grows and blesses us.

And we can make that journey—even when we're scared & even when we doubt—

because we believe in a God who can be trusted, a God who is faithful, a God who will never fail us.

We believe in the God of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac,

the God of love, the God of promise, and the God of miracles.

Will you pray with me?

God of power and love, thank you for fulfilling your promise to Abraham and Sarah

and for grafting us onto that promise. Thank you for working in their lives.

Thank you for their story that has been passed down for thousands of years.

Thank you that you speak through that story today,

calling each of us to listen for your voice, to trust in your promise, & to follow wherever you lead.

We pray this in the name of Jesus and by the power of the spirit. Amen