

“Because You Have Not Withheld”

A, Pentecost 7; 10:00 am

July 23, 2017

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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## **I. A STORY ABOUT A MAN**

It's a story about a man. A faithful man. A man who has been getting acquainted with a God named Yahweh. Oh, for lo these 25 or 30 years now. A very *unusual* God. Different from the other gods he's known—those gods of wind and water and sun and rain, of crops and forces of nature big and small.

This God is a deity unto himself. A real one-of-a-kind character. With his own godly ideas about how to live and be in the world, and how to live and be in relationship with the human beings.

If you remember back a couple weeks ago, we looked a few generations back (well, about *ten* or *twelve* generations back, according to Genesis 11) at Noah and the Flood. We went in the boat with Noah, following Yahweh God's instructions, along with the animals, two-by-two, and we weathered that storm. Forty looonnnngggg days and nights of monsoon rains!

And when we came out of the boat after the flood, we discovered the most amazing of sights: a Rainbow! And not *just* a pretty phenomenon of nature, but a Symbol, a Sign, capital S, of a Promise!

A promise by this new God on the scene to never again wipe out the world with a flood, but *also* to never again be distant and demanding and fickle and out of touch, like those other gods the people knew up to this point.

For once upon a time, we learned, a new God came on the scene. Or, more *accurately*, a new *understanding* came in the conceptions of humans about a very *old* God who had been here all along. This was not “your father's Oldsmobile.” A god just like your fathers' gods.

For once upon a time, a God named Yahweh eased onto the scene and people's understanding of God *eased* into a new gear. The Flood Moment, we saw, was one of those “thin times” when the veil between human being and God was sheer.

And now, this Abraham Episode is yet another “thin time” when Yahweh God is down-to-earth with the people and working on that relationship together. Establishing Covenant, a deep, meaningful kind of being together in this world and in life.

The Noahic Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant, and other covenants to follow, all the way down to Jesus' giving the New Covenant at the Last Supper, were *moments* of the Divine reaching out with a sign, a promise, and new direction and *kind* of relationship with humans. Covenant. Not fear and subjection.

## **II. A STORY ABOUT A MAN AND HIS GOD**

But back to Abraham. Many years before today's story, Yahweh had called him, chosen him to walk the journey *with* God. He was Abram then. Along the way Yahweh God gave him a new name: Abraham.

Then this God also entered into covenant with him and, way back in Chapter 15, promised him: “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.” In other words, as far as the eye could see and *far* beyond!

And *since* that day, when that promise was made, their relationship had had some ups and downs. For starters, Abraham didn't have any children, and it's *really* hard to populate a huge region from river to river, when you have no progeny!

So, God gave him Ishmael, a son by his wife's handmaiden. And that didn't go over real well. For Ishmael was not considered the “real deal.” So, finally, when Abraham and

Sarah were toddling along in their nineties, another son came along—in spite of a lot of laughter and disbelief!—Isaac. And Abe had his heir.

### **III. A STORY ABOUT A FATHER AND A SON**

But then, talk about ups and downs, it seems God is telling Abraham to take his beloved child Isaac—now a young man—to the mountain and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

And Abraham, because he's come to be generally pretty obedient to Yahweh God over the years of their covenant, packs up and makes the hike, son Isaac and servants in tow.

And Abraham knows, as he hikes along, that his son is as good as dead. And it's an awkward outing to say the least! The servants puzzle to themselves, I'm sure, as they journey. Where is the sacrifice? And Isaac puzzles to himself for as long as he can stand it, then blurts out the question of the hour: "But where is the lamb, Dad?!"

And Abraham doesn't have a good answer. In fact, as it comes off his tongue, he wonders if it sounds hollow, like a rote prayer, repeated too many times to bear any weight with his son now, in this crucial moment: "The Lord will provide."

### **IV. BUT, I JUST CAN'T, GOD!**

Have you ever been in that situation?

Has God ever asked you to do something you just couldn't see yourself doing? Something *really* hard. Terribly hard. Right up there with "sacrifice your-almost-firstborn-son hard!"

What did you do?

Did you put one foot in front of the other, and "just do it anyway?" Did you argue a whole bunch with God? Did you question God's character? Lose your faith? Decide you didn't really want to follow that God anyway?

### **V. A DIFFERENT KIND OF GOD**

The problem folks have always seen in this story is how it looks on the surface. "What kind of God would ask a man to sacrifice his son?!" Skeptics hurl the challenge at the believers. Or, just find in this story enough excuse to throw out the whole Old Testament or religion in general. A God that demands child sacrifice is not particularly popular in our time, if you hadn't noticed!

But, if we look below the surface of this story, it subverts itself. Completely turns upside down all our preconceived notions about God and how he operates.

At the start, this God appears to be like all the other gods—those gods who are never satisfied and are always needing more to be appeased—first the crops, then an animal, and now a child to be sacrificed. If you're *really* sincere and devout.

But then, God and the story take a turn which would have completely shocked the first hearers of the tale. He interrupts the sacrifice. "What?! This God *stopped* the sacrifice? The gods don't do that!"

And then, this God provides.

Rob Bell describes it: "Worship and sacrifice was about *you* giving to the *gods*. *This* story is about *this God* giving to *Abraham*. A God who does the giving? A God who does the providing?"

"That was a new idea at that time. Mind-blowing. Groundbreaking. A story about a God who doesn't demand anything but instead gives and blesses."

And what's even better? Abraham figures out that God is just getting started with the blessing! For an angel shows up on the scene, hollering from backstage to "Cut! Stop the action. Don't do it. Don't harm your son!" And a ram appears in the thicket, and all that is needed is provided.

Bell concludes:  
Abraham learns in this moment and after, “that this God is going to bless Abraham with such love and favor that through Abraham everybody on earth is going to be blessed. This God isn’t angry or demanding or unleashing wrath—this God has intentions to bless everybody. Not just people who love and obey and offer sacrifices to his God.”

This God intends to bless all people, everywhere. And what is required of Abraham? Trust. Faith. Belief. No sacrifice needed, just the believe that this God can be trusted.”

## **VI. A DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING OF GOD**

Ever felt like God was asking you to do something you *just* couldn’t? Or at least *really* didn’t want to? That was downright impossible, untenable, bordering on ridiculous?

I asked that question of my friends and colleagues. With the additional question of: What did you learn about God’s character from the experience?

The stories I heard were life-changing. Moving recollections about defining moments in life’s journey when you just think the road ahead is too difficult. That the universe is asking too much of you and you just can’t see yourself moving forward with courage and faith.

Those are times when the chants of our pop culture would shout out: “God is testing you! Everything happens for a reason, you know! God won’t give you more than you can bear. This is a test to see if you’re a real Believer or a fake one!”

And you want to scream, recoil and have nothing to do with such trite religiosity. Because those messages are *not* the ways of *this* God. This God we worship and follow, the God of Noah and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and Jesus does *not* create tests for us to see what we’re made of. Yahweh is not like those other gods or the

fickle spirits of *this* world. In *spite* of what you might read in the paper, hear on the news, see posted on Facebook and Pinterest and Snapchat!

*This* God, as we co-create our life in Him, walks *with* us into challenging moments, forks in the road, times of monumental decisions, and asks us—not to do the impossible alone or to pass some drummed-up “test” for any facetious reason, but to “look for the ram.” Walk up the hill, together, in faith and discover the offering in the bushes, the ram in the thicket—God’s never-ending and always present-though-temporarily-hidden provision.

A couple **testimonies** from those who were sure God was asking them to do the impossible:

“As a child and adolescent I struggled with a significant stutter. I avoided any form of public speaking or reading. I vowed I would never go into anything that required public speaking.

It’s a long story, but after my college days were completed I began to experience a call to ministry. I enrolled in seminary with a *great* deal of fear and trembling. It took some time and work, but I eventually worked through the stuttering issue and was recognized by many as a very adept speaker/preacher.” (And he is.)

A woman shares of loving, tending, nursing a baby boy for six months, completely believing the adoption was final, then being asked by God and the birth-mother to give the baby back. Complete despair, heartbreak to the nth degree and an impossible path lay before her.

She stepped out in faith, like Abraham, and over the next few years the rams appeared in the bush in abundance. She became the child’s godmother. She was asked to be the matron of honor in the birth-mother’s wedding. And then, one day, a call came from Africa that a baby girl was about to be born and she would be its mother. And then, a few years later, twin girls as well and the home and heart were filled with children and more family than ever imagined. Descendants from river to river!

## **VII. “BECAUSE YOU HAVE NOT WITHHELD”**

“Because you have not withheld anything from me, God says to Abraham. Because you have trusted me, walked with me, not held back even your most beloved son, because you have looked for the ram in the thicket, we will walk into the future together, blessed. I will bless you with descendants more numerous than the stars and you will bless me with walking in my way with love and trust.

When we *think* that God is testing us beyond what we can bear. Or, that somehow God enjoys the sport of seeing what we’re made of, remember this story.

The story *reads* on the surface that “God asks” him to sacrifice his son, to prove his character. But perhaps that is only one lens on the whole picture. A limited view, based on Abraham’s *understanding* of it, given the culture and child sacrifice being the norm at that time. (Remember, in that context, that’s what the gods asked you to do if you were *really* going to prove you were an upright and obedient person—ask you to prove it by sacrificing something really near and dear and valuable to you! Not just the fatted calf.)

But Yahweh God doesn’t go down *that* path. God provides the ram in the bush. God declares that he is *different* from all those other gods and doesn’t demand child sacrifice, nor test human beings in evil ways, but provides and guides.

And, even when we’re not going through a difficult patch, when the mountaintop experiences are outnumbering the valleys, God wants to be in covenant with each of us. This is not about going to church every Sunday or even most Sundays, or tithing, or serving on boards and committees or helping out with the potluck or the lawn or teaching Sunday School or helping with the Bazaar.

Covenant is about being in relationship. With God, with ourselves, with each other. Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, aaaannndddd-----you guessed it! Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday! 24/7. Withholding nothing. In with both feet. No “toe in the water kind deity,” this God.

God withholds nothing from *us*, his dearly beloved Children. Can we withhold nothing from our dearly, loving Creator God?

Jehovah Jireh  
my Provider.  
His grace is sufficient for me, for me, for me.  
Jehovah Jireh  
my Provider.  
His grace is sufficient for me.

My God shall supply all my needs  
according to His riches in glory.  
He will give His angels charge over me;  
Jehovah Jireh cares for me, for me, for me,  
Jehovah Jireh cares for me, for me, for me.

Amen.