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## **“Mount Moriah Road”**

### **Genesis 22:1-14**

**A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 29, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery**

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There is a street that crosses 15/501 in Durham called “Mount Moriah Road.” Maybe you know it. I live not too far from that road. Almost every day, I drive on Mount Moriah to go to work. It seems like everything is on this road. There are homes and apartments. There are hotels like the Comfort Inn and Homewood Suites by Hilton. There are stores like AT&T, Home Depot, Dick’s Sporting Goods, or The Bicycle Chain. And what would a street in Durham be without a Duke Medicine office building—that’s there too. Mount Moriah also confirms that Durham is a foodie town—there’s Outback Steakhouse, Kanki: Japanese House of Steak and Sushi, Moe’s Southwest Grill, Five Guys burgers and fries, Applebee’s, and many others, including the coffee god, Starbucks. Anybody getting hungry? Go to Mount Moriah road. There’s even a farm called ‘the Funny Girl farm’ where you can get fresh vegetables. There’s something for everyone on Mount Moriah road—that sounds like a good commercial tagline.

But this road is not a straight path. It winds and goes up and down at times. Though it is a familiar road, it is still perhaps a road less traveled. It’s not a major highway nor busy like 15/501, which is much more popular and a crowd favorite. Most people actually cross over Mount Moriah. They rather not take that road because it isn’t necessarily the quickest, easiest, or most direct way to their destination. It may not be the first option on your GPS.

And you can’t really blame those who might want to avoid Mount Moriah. Although there’s almost everything on that road, there may be something on it you may never want to encounter. God tests Abraham and tells him, “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.” Mount Moriah road is viewed as less convenient and less popular because it may be a road no one wants to take after we hear what God has to say, a road we hope God never commands us to use. It is a dangerous road, even with its normal-looking, harmless green sign, hanging between street lights, not because it is near the border of Durham and Orange County, but because it could lead to unthinkable and unfathomable events like the premature death of your child, your only son or daughter, whom you love. No one chooses to take Mount Moriah road.

There are numerous ways to read this biblical story from different angles. Of course, historically, Abraham is praised as an example of faithfulness and righteousness. Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, calls Abraham a “knight of faith.” Kierkegaard is just a later echo of the early church fathers who praised Abraham. This Genesis passage was also used during Lent or the Easter vigil because it was considered to parallel the story of Christ. This interpretive angle says that Abraham was a type of God, the Father, when he offered his son, his only son, Isaac, who prefigured Christ, God’s only begotten son. Isaac is a type of Christ and foreshadows Christ’s sacrifice (Caesarius of Arles, Irenaeus, John Wesley). Isaac carries the wood of the burnt offering just as Christ carried his own cross. Also, just as God provided a ram when no lamb could be found for the burnt offering, God provided the Lamb of God for an atoning sacrifice (Origen, Wesley). These typological and theological readings of this passage can be helpful in making larger connections to the whole story of God found in scripture.

But at the same time, these kinds of readings can be used to sanitize this story or romanticize and valorize Abraham’s faith. Clement of Rome, in the first century, is an example. He says boldly that “Isaac, with perfect confidence, as if knowing what was to happen, cheerfully yielded himself as a sacrifice.” What planet was he on? I’m not sure how cheerful Isaac really was. The passage doesn’t say he did a happy dance but it does say he had wood for the burnt offering laid on him and he asked, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Rather

than cheerful, he sounds a bit suspicious but I suppose anyone would be suspicious if they were bound and laid on a sacrificial altar.

With all of our possible attempts to soften this passage, it's difficult to smoothen the pavement of Mount Moriah road. That's because life is not smooth and Mount Moriah is about the life of faith. The famous painter Rembrandt knew this and he also recognized the different angles of this story so he painted this story four times throughout his life. The first in 1635 and the last in 1655. He was 29 years old when he made the first oil painting—"The Sacrifice of Isaac." Also, during this time, his first son was born and he died two months later; Rembrandt traveled Mount Moriah road. In this 1635 painting, he depicts Abraham taking the knife about to kill Isaac while the angel intervenes to stop it. The angel grabs Abraham's right hand that had the knife and in the painting the knife is then suspended in mid-air. Abraham looks at the angel away from his son while his left hand totally covers the entire face of Isaac so he doesn't see what's happening. It's as if Abraham can't bear to have his son see what was taking place as he lays motionless on the wood with his hands behind his back. Nor can Abraham bear to look at his son and kill him.

This story could be read as an Old Testament horror flick. We may sing the Sunday school song, "Father Abraham." "I am one of them and so are you"? I'm not sure I want to be one if Father Abraham treats his kids like this! Abraham is not your Little House on the Prairie type of neighbor either. He profits from the sale of his wife twice (Gen 12:16-13:2 and 20:14-16) and takes sexual advantage of his wife's enslaved Egyptian woman (Gen 16). He has a tattered biography yet he's the one who receives the divine promise that he will be blessed and be a blessing. What does this say about God—that God will use "spasmodic believers" (E. Achtemeier)?

We can't soften God's role in this story either. Martin Luther's wife told him, "I don't believe God would ask anyone to sacrifice his son." That may be one opinion but Genesis seems to reveal something else about God—that God may act in ways that we would deem unchristian and never approve. Rabbi Shlomo Itshaqi, a medieval commentator, says that God told Abraham to bring Isaac up there.... "He didn't say 'slaughter him.'" There are different angles to this story yet no one can deny that God commands Abraham to do the unthinkable, and in the thought of Kierkegaard to take a leap of faith that suspends the ethical, to sacrifice a child, his own child. I don't think we can soften this or interpret it away. There are some things that hermeneutical antiseptics can't remove.

Sacrifice of human beings is one of them. Our sons and daughters, friends, family members, acquaintances, and children, are being sacrificed in America. Sacrificed with inadequate educational resources that perpetuate cycles of poverty and racism. Sacrificed with lack of opportunity revealing a lack of love for them even though children represent the future of our world. Children, sacrificed on the altar of gun violence and a prison system that is really a big business (a New Jim Crow system).

Sacrificing our war veterans, those who've sacrificed their lives for this country, yet can't receive adequate and timely care. This is a sign of moral decay and deterioration of our nation's integrity. Theories don't match practices and our love is sacrificed on the altar of bureaucracy while wood is placed on their backs and apparently we are willing to move forward with the human sacrifice in this national liturgy.

Mount Moriah road refuses to be removed from our spiritual lexicon as sacrifice seeps in as a toxin in our US body politic. The truth is that as children of Abraham we may already be on Mount Moriah road because we have no choice in the matter. As followers of God, heirs of the promise to Abraham, even if you are not on that road right now, sooner or later you will have to travel Mount Moriah road. It may not be your usual way home and you may want to avoid it because you see what it did to Abraham and Isaac and that poor little ram. They were all in a bind and normally none of us want to be in a bind.

Jews have called this story "the binding of Isaac." But what we discover is that Isaac is not the only one bound. Mount Moriah is a place where you find yourself in a bind and you don't even know how you got there.

Isaac is bound physically and laid on the altar. He finds himself in a very tight situation, literally, but also in a place of questioning and curiosity as he asks, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Where is my deliverance and when will I get out of this bind, out of here? Sound familiar. This is where Mount Moriah road leads—to a binding.

Abraham is in a bind too between a God of blessing and a son he loves, between a God you can’t see and a son you do see. He’s between a rock and a hard place, between what is known and the unknown, between a comfortable home and Moriah, between listening to God and looking crazy to others. A place of uncertainty yet a space of trust and worship nonetheless, believing that God will provide the lamb when you don’t see one. Do I sacrifice my sense of security or job or friendship or legacy and name to obey God? A past church leader taught that “The best evidence of our fearing God is our being willing to honour him with that which is dearest to us, and to part with all to him, or for him”(John Wesley). Mount Moriah is a holy mystery and the road that leads to it is a tough road to travel and where tough decisions have to be made. No one willingly chooses Mount Moriah road because no one wants to be in a bind.

Animal rights activists may even be perturbed that the poor ram was in his own bind. He was “caught in a thicket by its horns,” about to be used by God as the sacrifice. Imagine if the ram could talk—“Doesn’t God know I’m a ram and not a lamb which is what Isaac asked about?” The ram was helpless. In a bind.

We have the binding of Isaac, Abraham, and a ram. And as a preacher, this passage put me in a bind too because what is a preacher to do with what could be considered child sacrifice ordered by God? Mount Moriah binds all of us in some way. And maybe this is where there is also some good news.

No one travels willingly on Mount Moriah road. But Abraham and Isaac walked together on this road to remind us that this life is a spiritual pilgrimage in community—they walked together to demonstrate that others travel on Mount Moriah road with us. We should never walk alone. I can guarantee that you are not alone because we are bound to one another in this world. Members of the same body. Someone else is also a pilgrim on this unceasing journey that may lead to a place you would never choose.

And it’s not just that Isaac, Abraham, the ram, and us are bound. God is also in a bind. The last words suggest this. Despite all of the challenges of Mount Moriah, we are told that this place is also a place of God’s provision and that Mount Moriah can also be known as ‘The Lord will provide.’ It is not that we are just bound to God to obey God but God is bound to us by God’s word and promises of blessing and provision. God keeps God’s promises and the Lord, as John Wesley says, “will always have his eyes upon his people in their straits, that he may come in with seasonable [relief] in the critical juncture.”

It may not be a ram but it will be what you need when you need it most. When I see the street sign “Mount Moriah road” I do think of my daughter, Moriah. I think of Abraham, Isaac, and the ram. I think of sacrifice. But I also think of God and remember that God will provide a lamb and has already done so in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Don’t fear Mount Moriah road. We all have to take it at some point because God will call you by name to take this road less traveled to go where you would never choose to go. And when God calls, may your answer be like Abraham, “Here I am.” “Here I am.”