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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Genesis 22:1-19

17 July 2022

Summer of Stories: Isaac

*Openings Greeting/Prayer:*

Please join me in prayer: God who provides, we come to you this morning, longing for understanding and insight as we explore your scriptures. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear your leading and wisdom this morning. Help us sit in the unknowns and difficulties of the story. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*Message:*

Summer of Stories 2022. We are on week 3, the story of the binding of Isaac, Abraham's second son. In our first week, we explored sibling rivalry on the family farm in the story of Cain and Abel. We were challenged by God's mercy and patience in the face of Cain's jealousy and lack of remorse for murdering his brother. In week 2, we walked with Ishmael, son of Sarah's servant Hagar and Abraham. Like Cain, Sarah's jealousy and anger could not be contained as she watched Hagar bring Abraham's firstborn into the world. When Sarah miraculously had a son of her own, she told Abraham that Hagar and Ishmael must leave. God's mercy and grace come through clearly in this story too as Hagar and Ishmael nearly die of thirst in the wilderness until God reveals a well for water. Abraham's firstborn son lives on to father a nation.

In our story last week, Isaac was most likely a toddler, having just been weaned from his mother. Today's story might be 10 or so years later, which would make Isaac an early teenager.

Isaac probably has vague, fuzzy memories of his older brother Ishmael, smiling and playing with him, but he may have never known what happened to them after father sent them away. His mother, Sarah, could hardly speak Ishmael's name, let alone offer the name of his mother. Isaac had only heard the story from his father. Most mornings, Isaac went out with the sheep early to graze for the day, but this particular morning, his dad had woken him up in the dark and told him that they needed to get going. Isaac wiped his eyes several times and sat up, bewildered by this day's startling beginning. Dad had seemed frazzled and a little frantic when Isaac first looked up at him, but when he came out of his tent, all of the animals were accounted for and in their pens as they should be, so Isaac wasn't sure what the early rising was about.

He took a little water and splashed his face as he wandered over to where he had seen his dad disappear in another tent. He heard two servants start to stir and then his dad nearly ran him over when he came out of the tent. They locked eyes for a brief moment, and Isaac wasn't sure what to say. He had never seen that look on his dad's face before, the intensity of his eyes. Was it fear or anger or pain or frustration? He couldn't quite tell in the dawning light, but something wasn't right. Isaac followed him to the donkeys, one already loaded with wood and the others ready for riders. The waterskins were full, and mom must have been up late last night making bread because the packs were filled. Isaac swiped a piece of bread from the first donkey and kept walking behind his father as they wandered around the camp. Abraham was giving instructions to the other servants, but Isaac could only make out bits and pieces of each conversation... long journey... gone awhile... God told me...Isaac...the mountain. When they joined the two servants and mounted the donkeys, the sun broke over the horizon.

Isaac's father only said a few words the first day, just looking out into the distance, squinting every once in while and mumbling to himself. The second day was even worse as Isaac

noticed the group settle into a stark silence. They had stopped to eat and found a well to water the donkeys and fill their water skins each day, but as the time passed, Isaac didn't even hear his dad mumbling anymore. When they made their mid-day stop on the third day, his father finally broke the silence, telling the two servants that had been guiding the animals and keeping watch at night to stay at that place. Isaac saw his dad wave in the direction of the mountains ahead and heard him say something about worshipping with the boy. "The boy"... Isaac only ever heard his dad say that when he had done something wrong like leave the gate unlocked so some of the animals would get out. Whenever his parents used his actual name, there was always a note of hope and rest in it as though his presence brought them peace. He never quite understood their sentiment in the moment because his name meant laughing, but he grew to enjoy those moments when they would speak his name with almost a relieved sigh. "Isaac..." but now the boy.

As he and Abraham walked on together, Isaac kept shifting the wood around on his shoulders and back. His dad was carrying the torch and the knife, while he had taken the load of wood. Dad had given him a long hug before he started loading the wood, and Isaac could feel the moisture in his beard on the side of his head as they embraced. Had he been crying? What about? What was Isaac not noticing? Finally, it dawned on him. The lamb... they did not have a lamb for the offering. Dad had said that they were going to worship, which meant that they would be offering a sacrifice of one of their lambs when the time came, but they had not brought a lamb along. Maybe Abraham had expected Isaac to remember that, and that was why he hadn't said much. Maybe Isaac had already failed the test that his father had laid before him. Since that hug, Abraham couldn't even look at him anymore. His eyes were fixed ahead on some distant spot. Isaac couldn't handle his thoughts anymore so he just blurted out, "Father!" In a distant tone that belied his words, Abraham responded. "Here I am, my son." Isaac gulped and asked about the

lamb, for they were not going to just find a lamb out here in the wilderness. They hadn't seen much in the three days that they had been walking. Abraham didn't respond for a long while as the rocks crunched and shifted under their feet. Isaac heard him inhale again and say, "God himself will see about the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." And they walked on in silence.

When his dad raised his hand to stop, Isaac nearly didn't notice; he had gotten lost in his thoughts. He had noticed his father's hands shaking, the torch faltering as they went along, and he had wondered if he should offer to carry something else, but he dare not break the long silence that had enveloped the air around them. Abraham took the wood off of his shoulders and laid the knife next to it. Then they began gathering rocks for an altar. When Abraham had the altar built, he had Isaac bring him the wood and untie it. Then Abraham started stacking the wood on the altar, and Isaac started looking for a lamb or any animal that they could use for the burnt offering. They had not seen or hear anything besides their footsteps or breathing since they had left the servants and donkeys behind. He heard Abraham call his name and falter a moment. Isaac looked back, and Abraham had finished with the wood. When he came back to the altar, Abraham grabbed his arm and began wrapping the rope around it, cutting his skin. Isaac caught his breath as he realized what was happening. He looked up into his dad's eyes as the rope passed around his body, and they were distant, almost hallow, devoid of life.

That's when Isaac began to struggle and shout. "Dad, don't... what are you doing... ouch... No... there's got to be another way... ouch... why are you doing this... help... anybody... dad please... what are you doing... help... help..." and Abraham stuffed a tuft of Isaac's cloak in his mouth as he continued to squirm. Abraham finished tying him and then lifted him up, carrying him to the altar. When he set Isaac down, Isaac felt the stabbing pain of one particular piece of wood in the center of his back and he cried out. He couldn't see his dad

anymore. His eyes scanned around, and he craned his neck to see where the knife and torch had been, but they were already gone. What was dad doing? Had he gone crazy? Why would he do this to him? Was it because he had forgotten the lamb? Then suddenly Abraham entered his vision again, this time mumbling some of the words and phrases that they said at other offerings, “Praise to God Almighty for the gifts he has given us. Praise to the creator of all things...” and Isaac began to panic as he saw the knife in his dad’s hand. When he looked at his face, tears were running down his cheeks as he raised the knife. Then his other hand came into Isaac’s field of vision and covered his eyes and mouth. “No... Dad... please...” muffled and unintelligible as he wriggled with all his might, trying to free himself from the ropes. They dug into his arms and legs until he heard a voice. “Abraham, Abraham.” And his dad lifted his hand from Isaac’s face, and said, “Here I am.” But Isaac couldn’t hear anything else. He could tell though the dad could, and before he knew it, his father cut the ropes. Isaac scrambled off the altar and ran and hid behind a rock, watching his father from a distance. Then he noticed the ram too, caught in the thicket not far off in the opposite direction. He watched as his father slaughtered it on the altar, thankful that something else had been on the altar. Then they walked back home together.

Interpreters have struggled with this story for centuries, if not millennia. Some have wondered if it is the story of why the people of ancient Israel did not participate in child sacrifice, but it doesn’t seem to say that. In fact, it seems that Abraham is rewarded by God because of his radical obedience, even being willing to sacrifice his second son. What more, Abraham already had given up his firstborn son, which God had approved of, and now God was telling him to slaughter his second-born, the supposed heir of the promises that God had made. Was God crazy? What kind of God would ask someone to do this or even be willing to do this? In our present day, we would have taken Isaac from Abraham and tried to prosecute him or at

least admit him for psychiatric care even if he claimed that God had told him to do it. How did this experience shape Isaac's future life? Could Isaac trust his father anymore? Could Abraham trust God anymore? When does radical obedience to God or any other authority lead to casualties that are just evil, sinful, and inexcusable? Finally, I wonder why Abraham did not argue with God about this request. Only a few chapters earlier, Abraham had advocated for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, asking God to spare the cities if only one righteous person were present. Had God wanted Abraham to argue and advocate for Isaac too? In this story, Abraham's obedience seems cold, determined, and blind. Is this the kind of obedience that God is calling us to as a community? How have you discerned God's call and request on your life, especially when the message seems totally crazy like this one was for Abraham?

*Closing Prayer:*

God of provision, God who sees to the circumstances in each of our lives, thank you for the difficult words and stories in your scriptures. Thank you that faith is messy and complicated, not always clear-cut nor easy. Fill us with your Spirit anew that we may see clearly and discern well what you are calling us to today. Give us vision for the growth of your renewed family, your kingdom breaking into our world. In Jesus name. Amen.