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*Moving Mountains:
Challenging our Cherished Heresies—Moriah (#1)*
Genesis 22

One of the spiritual highlights of my year was joining my son Cooper and the rest of the team on the Mexico Once' build. It was a great chance to get from behind the pulpit and knock down the barriers than can exist between a pastor and his young parishioners. To get to know them by name. To let them get comfortable with me.

But at one point, they got a little too comfortable. The Amor camp is pretty rustic; it has no restrooms. Only a bank of outhouses. One day I was interrupted in my visit to that facility when I heard a bump on the door... followed by the blaring of a car horn. When I tried to open the door, I discovered that I had been pinned inside the outhouse by one of the vans driven by Julie Williams. (Julie **used** to be a member of this congregation until I had her excommunicated last week.) When I finally clawed my way to freedom, I discovered that all of our "Christian" young people were standing around, laughing hysterically at their pastor. I don't think that was very nice!

We are on a mountain climbing experience through the Bible and we are using those powerful experiences to challenge false teaching in our culture today. Last week was a humdinger; it is worth downloading if you missed church. This morning, we are going to challenge a **parenting** heresy. Again, I realize that heresy is a strong word. But I choose it intentionally because millions of parents, including some within this church, are missing the biblical mark on raising their kids. This might offend you. But will you at least listen to what God might be saying to you today?

This morning's encounter takes place on Mt. Moriah in Genesis 22. God has called Abraham to leave his home, go to a new land and become the Father of a new nation. Through God's chosen people, He will send a savior to the world. Very exciting! One of the most important covenants in the Bible.

Problem is Abraham and his wife Sarah were barren. And they weren't exactly spring chickens, either. God called Abraham when he was 75 and Sarah, 65. Another **25 years** passed, and nothing had happened. No baby! How can God create a nation if he can't even give Abraham and Sarah one little baby? But finally, the impossible happened: When Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 they gave birth to a son—Isaac. Suddenly, in this one miracle child, Abraham saw all of God's

promises being fulfilled. Isaac would grow up and have many children. Within a few generations... a great nation. And some day, a Messiah. Salvation. A blessing to the entire world. Just as God had promised.

So there was a lot riding on this kid. You think your kids are under pressure. How would you like to have been Isaac? A lot at stake here, which makes this next mountain story so remarkable... and so horrible. (Read Genesis 22)

How could God ask such a thing? How could God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son? Especially since Isaac was the key to fulfilling the promise that God Himself had made to Abraham. God promised to create a great nation. Isaac was Abraham's only son. It's hard to get started on making a great nation if you sacrifice your only child.

This wasn't unheard of. Many pagan religions of the time practiced child sacrifice. Those who worshipped the God Molech built a huge hollow bronze statue with outstretched arms. They would build a fire inside that statue and, when it was red hot, place their babies in those arms. Ghastly! Child sacrifice was quite common. It's just that Abraham assumed his God was better than that. **Apparently, he was wrong.** Yahweh was no different than the rest. He, too, required the blood of children. So Abraham might not have been that surprised... **but he must have been heartbroken.**

Still, he obeyed...and in one of the most gripping Bible stories, we watch as the boy carries his own sacrificial wood to the top of Moriah, is bound by his father, lain on the altar...ready to receive the knife. Only then...only when Abraham has raised his hand to slay his son, does God stop him. Abraham had passed the test of faith and a very relieved father and son walked back down the mountain...together.

Remember last week I told you that Old Testament stories are important for what they **foretell**? What does this story foretell about the future? The crucifixion, of course! Moriah looks ahead to Calvary where God the Father offers up his only Son, Jesus, as a sacrifice for the entire world. But in that case, no angel stops the executioner's hand. This isn't just a test. God's Son really dies. The story of Abraham and Isaac on Moriah foretells powerfully the greatest act of sacrificial love in human history.

But Mt. Moriah also **tells** us things. And one of the things it tells us flies in the face of a deeply held American heresy. And here it is: **My number one job as a parent is to keep my kids safe and happy.** Would you agree that this is a high value in our American culture? I sympathize. There is nothing more precious to Cyndi and me than our two kids. We would do anything for them. We would sacrifice anything for them. So would you, if you are a good parent. It costs a lot of money to raise kids. It takes a lot of time to raise kids. The minute Rachel came into our lives, our world was rocked.

The Bible has a lot to say about good parenting. The most famous Bible verse in Judaism...the "Shema" in Deuteronomy 6...the verse that is repeated every day in Jewish prayer...is a passage about how to raise children. And ultimately it is Jesus' relationship with his heavenly father, whom he calls—what?—"Abba" (which means "Daddy")... that models for us the intimacy that every parent and child should share. It is God's plan that parents should love and raise and sacrifice for their children in order to prepare them for this life.

Which makes Mt. Moriah so horrifying. How could God ask any parent to do what he asked of Abraham? To **sacrifice** his own child? Abraham adored his son. Isaac was the fulfillment of their deepest hopes and dreams...and of God's promises. And now, **at God's word**, he was going to put his beloved son at risk? It was not at all safe for Abraham to take Isaac to the top of Moriah. It was supremely dangerous. Yet Abraham did it; he put his own child in harm's way. Because Abraham knew that it was even more dangerous to disobey God... and because he trusted God to do what was best with his child, even if he could not see it at the time and even if it wasn't safe. Or happy.

Christian parents, the safety and happiness of our children **are** a priority for us. We **are** called to protect and nurture our kids until they can take responsibility for themselves. But their safety and happiness is not our supreme priority. Our supreme priority as parents is to raise our children to know, love and obey God's call upon their lives...even when it is frightening or costly or inconvenient. And, yes, even when it is dangerous.

I have been in conversation with Lori Page this week. One of Lori's kids, Ashley, felt the call of God to go to a foreign country to teach English as an evangelistic opportunity. She left last month. Guess which foreign country she went to? Yes. Japan. Guess which city she was teaching in? Yes, Sendai. The epicenter of the tidal wave. Ashley is all right, but in the earliest days following the tsunami when others were being evacuated **she wanted to stay to care for the students at the school**. As the days passed, she was urged to leave by the State Department but chose to remain behind. Finally, with the reactor issues, she agreed to leave and is on a flight out even as I speak.

Now moms, put yourselves in Lori's place! What does she do? How does she advise her 23 year old daughter? She is fearful for her safety. Yet she knows that Ashley is praying, trying to listen to God... trying to be faithful to his call upon her life. As Lori told me, everything inside of her wanted to scream, "Come home!" Instead she found herself saying, "You must listen carefully to God's voice in this. It is not safe; you must be sure of what God is telling you to do!"

Now...if a parent's number one job is to keep their kids safe and happy, Lori isn't doing a very well. But if a parent's number one job is to teach their child to love, listen to and obey God... then she's behaving heroically as she parents her heroic child.

Tell me; did it feel entirely safe to send our kids to Mexico? We're not stupid; we read the newspapers. We know what is going on in parts of that country. And we are not reckless. We always seek to be wise with our missionaries, wherever they are sent. But honestly, when did Jesus promise us that it would be safe to be his disciples? When did he promise us that following him would mean only safety and happiness? As a matter of fact, I recall a time when Jesus promised precisely the opposite.

Luke 9:23 **Then [Jesus] said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?"**

"Deny yourself?" Say "No!" to yourself when you could say yes? How un-American is that? When was the last time you heard "Deny yourself" in an advertising campaign? **"Take up your cross daily?"** We're not talking about a necklace here. The cross was an instrument of death. What does it mean to "die" to ourselves daily? For centuries, Christians took Jesus at his word. They were willing to step into the most dangerous of situations because they believed that Jesus was worth living for... and worth dying for. When Christian parents were led into the Roman arena to be slaughtered for sport, they took their children with them. To die. They didn't want their children to be raised by pagans. Better to die a Christian than to live as a pagan. Missionaries once packed their belongings in a coffin instead of a suitcase because they expected to die on the field... and they took their children with them. Last week we saw the pictures of the Eubank children in Burma. Is that safe? No! But do you remember Dave Eubank's words to us? "If we die in there, we don't die for a cause. We die for love. Love is worth dying for."

Is it absolutely safe to send our children into Mexico on Christ's mission? No. It is not. We are prudent and cautious, but there are no guarantees of safety. Is it absolutely safe to send our Sound & Sand students to the Middle East right now? No. It is not. We will be prudent and cautious, but there are no guarantees of safety. But if we choose safety as our first priority every time, what will we steal from our children's experience of discipleship?

Loving parents have two choices about raising their children. They can make them an idol... or they can make them a sacrifice. Many parents—perhaps most—make their children into idols. Even Christian parents. Sometimes especially Christian parents. You might object, "I don't worship my kids." Don't you? Remember, idolatry is putting anything first before God. So what about your children are you putting first... before God? Their safety? Their happiness? Their success in academics or sports or music? Their fulfillment? Look at the investment and priority of your money and time into your children's lives. Are you fitting them for heaven or Harvard? Don't get me wrong. Our own children have been involved in music and

sports. We have and are investing in great schools for them. But one of the questions that has guided our decisions about our kids is this: how does this prepare them to serve Christ and his kingdom? How does this strengthen their relationship with His body, the Church?

If your first priority in the parenting of your children is their safety, their happiness, their success, their prosperity, their career, their sports, their music—if by your parenting you are teaching them that the world revolves around them—**then you might be making your child into an idol.** We would never think of it in those terms. Our children would never think of themselves as objects of worship. But if our highest priority for our kids is their safety, happiness and success... then we might be guilty of idolatry.

The other choice is to offer our child as a sacrifice. Paul told the Romans in chapter 12, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice” to God. Jesus told us that following him meant self-sacrifice and risk. Every Christian parent needs to do battle with American culture that calls us to idolize our kids. **Instead, Christ calls us to place our children on the altar before him.** As an act of worship and obedience. As a way of declaring, “My kids belong to Jesus!” The Bible says that their greatest good—their highest and noblest calling— is to offer everything they have, every gift they possess, every talent they have developed... to the service of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and to his Church. Will that service always be safe? No. Will it always be convenient? No. Will it always be happy? No. **But it will always be best... and anything less is idolatry.**

Let me give this to you in a picture. *[Child comes up; stands on communion table.]* I can see my child as an idol—everything revolves around him. Everything is about his safety, success, happiness, promotion. I am willing to make every possible sacrifice to insure that he has the best life possible. *[Child lays on the table.]* Or I can see my child as a sacrifice. I can place my child on the altar before God, offered to Him as an act of worship. I am willing to make every possible sacrifice to insure that he loves Jesus, lives Jesus’ way, is ready to be part of what God is doing to rescue the world in Christ—and to pay the price of doing so. In other words, to insure that my child is prepared for eternity... starting in this moment.

Your highest call as a Christian parent is not to keep your children safe and happy; your highest call as Christian parents—and our call as a church—is to present them to the Lord and prepare them for a life of surrendered service to Him. Will you do it?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**

- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **Dig deeper**

1. Put yourself in Abraham's shoes. How could you say "Yes" to such a request?
2. Do you agree or disagree with the statement, "The number one job of a parent is to keep their children safe and happy." Why or why not?
3. Pastor Mark spoke of two options for parents: that we make an idol of our children or make a sacrifice of them. What does he mean by that? What are or should you be doing to prepare your children or grandchildren for heaven, and not just for a happy, successful life on earth?