

Sermon for the Feast of the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord

‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.’

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It is an uncomfortable truth of the Old Testament that the Lord requires of all flesh the sacrifice of their first born. Whether beast or human, that which opens the womb shall be set apart for the Lord, and unto the Lord it shall be sacrificed.

Indeed, before the revelation of the Law, God spoke to Abraham, and demanded of him that he *take his son, his only son, whom he loved, Isaac, and go unto the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.*

Abraham took Isaac unto a *mountain of which he was told*. And there burdened his son with wood and fire. Isaac asks: *‘Behold, the wood and the fire, but where is the sacrifice?’* His father replies: *‘The Lord shall provide the sacrifice: my son.’*

Too often this is misunderstood as Abraham lying to his son to get him to keep going, yet we must either assume that Abraham was preternaturally convincing or that Isaac was on the very lowest end of the distribution curve for intelligence, for how could Isaac otherwise allow himself, a strong youth, to be bound by his aged father who was *as good as dead*?

We must understand Abraham’s answer to his son’s question differently, then; we must understand it as the Hebrew in truth reads: *‘The Lord shall provide the sacrifice, that is, my son.’*

Abraham tells Isaac that he shall be offered, and Isaac obeys, even *unto death*. It is for this reason that this passage of the Old Testament is known as the '*Binding of Isaac*', for the important thing in it is not merely that a father would kill his own son out of obedience to God, but that the son would freely *go forth to the slaughter* out of obedience to his father.

Isaac is bound, Abraham pulls back his head, and raises the knife, that he might drain his blood; yet an angel of the Lord descends, and stays the murderous hand of Abraham, saying 'Abraham, Abraham', even as he cries out, '*I am ready!*' A more accurate rendering of what is so shamefully translated as '*Here I am.*'

The sacrifice of the beloved son was stopped. But do not be deceived, thinking that God changed His mind, for the Lord *is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore*. The sacrifice of the beloved son was stopped, but it was not cancelled. It was merely postponed. For Isaac was not a victim *without spot or blemish*. He was but a mortal. A pure sacrifice is required, of a perfect son, in complete obedience.

In Isaac's place, a ram was offered, this ram not replacing Isaac, but transferring the self-immolation, the burnt offering of Isaac to another. Abraham and his son left that mountain, and called it '*The Lord shall provide the sacrifice.*' The sacrifice still demanded; yet still unfulfilled.

In the Law of Moses, it is commanded that '*you are to set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or otherwise, you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.*'

They, like Isaac, shall be redeemed with a lamb, lest their neck be broken. And like Isaac, this lamb does replace the self-sacrifice demanded of every firstborn man. It merely designates that man as an unworthy sacrifice unto the Lord, for the Lord accepts only that which is *without spot or blemish*.

A child is born in Bethlehem, born *of the Holy Spirit by the Virgin Mary*. His mother brings Him, but a small infant, to that house of blood, the Temple of slaughter, built upon the very mountain on which Isaac was bound, to present Him unto the Almighty.

This child shall not be redeemed with the blood of a lamb, but be consecrated with two turtledoves the offering of peace, the offering demanded of only the poorest, for in His incarnation, our Lord has become poor, and in His presentation, He has been declared pure.

An old man approaches the Christ child, and declares '*mine own eyes have seen thy salvation.*' For he has seen Him who shall finish the sacrifice first begun in Isaac. That act of perfect obedience required of Abraham's son shall come to completion in the Son of God, who has now manifested Himself as the Son of Man.

'And he worshiped the Lord there.'

'He himself took part of flesh and blood, that through death, he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.'

He is now presented before the Father as fully man, flesh and blood, a perfect sacrifice *pleasing unto the Lord*.

Leave then, O Christ, this house of sacrifice, for you have become the altar of God. Leave now this place, and return to your humble land, an infant lowly. Grow strong and wise, *increasing in wisdom and stature*, that you might *help the offspring of Abraham*.

For no lamb shall take your place, for you are the *Lamb that shall take away the sin of the world*, and the very son of the Father; His Son, His only Son, whom He loves.

In the fire of Your passion you shall bear the wood of offering to that very mountain upon which Isaac was first bound. You too shall be bound upon a tree, strong and unbending. All generations shall look upon this tree and declare to you, *'The Lord has provided a sacrifice: His son.'*

No angel shall descend, nor heavenly voice prevent Your

slaughter, for You must accomplish Your Father's will: *'to destroy the one who has the power of death.'* To descend into hell.

Leave then, O Christ, this house of sacrifice, and return to your humble land, an infant lowly. For *all generations* shall look upon you, held within the arms of your holy mother, and say what all humanity has longed to say from the beginning of time.

'For this child, I have prayed.'

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*Preached
by Pastor Fields*

Sermon

Texts: 1 Samuel 1:21-28; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-32.