

"Love or Power?"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
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I'm really starting to wonder about this God of mine. Let me introduce myself: I'm Abraham. You may have read about me in the Bible. I used to be called Abram, before God changed my name to Abraham. That's when he told me I was going to become the father of great nations. Sometimes I wish I could just go back to those days before God made all those promises (Promises, promises...). But it's too late at this point, I've chosen my path and now I have to walk it.

I'll never forget the day when I was just minding my own business and God came to me, and told me to leave my home and parents, and take my wife Sarai and move. Boy, was she mad at me. I can still hear her voice, "Who is this God, why doesn't he come and tell me his plan?" I'm sure she thought I'd been dipping into the wine cellar. But, like a dutiful wife, she packed everything up and followed me to a place where we did not know anybody and life was hard. I explained to her God's promise to me and the blessings we could expect, but all she could say was, "Promises, promises... Whatever happened to the promise of a land of milk and honey, honey? This place we live in is a pit, and we barely have enough food to eat."

Sure enough, we didn't have much and a famine was coming, so we packed up and went to Egypt. As soon as we arrived I knew that when the Egyptians saw how beautiful Sarai was, they would kill me so they could take her. So I asked her to say she is my sister.

That didn't go over very well. But Sarai's a trooper – that is, once she gets over her initial shock and resentment. And guess what? The Pharaoh of Egypt ends up taking her as one of his concubines. It wasn't all bad though, because I became rich in Egypt, and eventually the Pharaoh realized Sarai was my wife and he gave her back to me. He was pretty upset that I had lied; come to think of it, Sarai was pretty upset, too. But the lie had worked to save my life, and so the next time we were in this situation, we lied one more time. I kept telling Sarai that she was doing it in the service of God, and that in

the end we'd have offspring as impossible to count as stars in the sky. That's when she said, "Offspring...you keep talking about all these offspring. I'm no spring chicken, you know. We've been trying for decades and neither of us is getting any younger." After that she told me to go sleep with her maid servant Hagar, so I could have a baby and then maybe I'd leave her alone.

Maybe I was supposed to say, "No honey, that's not necessary, I don't want to sleep with anyone else but you." But I didn't. I mean, I didn't want to let God down. As you can probably imagine, my relationship with Sarai was already strained, but when Hagar got pregnant with my son Ishmael, things really got bad between us. But at least I had a son, and I would become the bearer of a great nation.

To be honest, none of this was going how I had expected. And then suddenly God upped the stakes. This time, God came to me and renewed all his promises of blessings. And then he told me to take a sharpened flintstone and cut off the tip of my penis. I thought, "Now wait a minute God...this whole thing is getting a little strange." But God insisted that this was to be the sign of our covenant. Couldn't we just exchange bracelets or something? What if I dab a little water on my forehead? Come on, there's got to be a better way. But God was not in the mood to bargain. And once I circumcised myself, God changed my name to Abraham, and from then on Sarai was to be called Sarah, and God promised that she would soon have a baby.

When I went to tell Sarah about all this, she laughed hysterically. Now she knew I'd gone completely insane – she was ninety and I was ninety-nine. Nevertheless, after my wound had healed, we proceeded to make a baby. When that baby was born he came out laughing, so we named him Isaac, which means "to laugh". It may have been postpartum hormones or something, because once Isaac was born, Sarah wanted me to get rid of my son Ishmael and his mom Hagar. Prior to this, it seemed that I was the heartless, self-centered one in our relationship, but my less admirable characteristics must have started rubbing off on Sarah. Get this, she had me send Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness without much food and water, and it was clear that they would both die. I thought to myself, "What is going on? This is not what I was promised. This hardly feels like a blessing. Who have I turned into? What has happened to my family?"

But despite all our problems (and my own emotional and spiritual turmoil), Isaac's birth was the beginning of one of the best periods of my and Sarah's marriage. I had never seen Sarah so happy, so fulfilled. She laughed a lot, and doted on that little "miracle boy." I also started feeling a bit better about my relationship with God. I had since learned that God intervened in the wilderness and saved Hagar and Ishmael. But then, when that capricious God of mine told me he was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, I decided this time I was going to challenge him. I was fascinated to find that God was willing to negotiate with me – you can read all about it in Genesis 18. I stood my ground on this issue and God listened. It seemed that God and I were entering a new level in our relationship.

Then, just when things started looking up, God came to me with another demand. God commanded me to take my beloved son Isaac and sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. At first I was numb. Was this some kind of cruel joke? Who was this God I was following? I thought my God was an exception to the many gods worshipped by the peoples living around me. I knew that their gods asked for child sacrifices, but I thought my God was different. I guess I should have known better.

I would have disobeyed God, but I had just watched Lot's wife get turned into a pillar of salt for her disobedience. With a God this violent and unpredictable, I didn't think I had a choice. I either had to kill Isaac, or God would kill both of us and the promise and blessings would be lost.

What kind of God would ask a father to kill his own son? I knew I could not tell Sarah or she would go postal. So I told her God had suggested that Isaac and I go to Mt. Moriah together to make a sacrifice. Sarah had always felt Isaac could use a little more father and son bonding time, so she was supportive and even helped us get packed. I kept myself busy with details of the trip so I didn't have to feel much. It took three days to get to Mt. Moriah. During those days, Isaac was jubilant; he marveled at all the plants and animals he'd never seen before, he wanted to know the names of everything, and he got his nose down to smell the desert flowers' faint perfume. It would have taken us four days if we stopped every time he saw another new species. At night, we laid on the ground together looking up at the sky full of stars. Isaac asked me to tell him all the

stories I knew about the constellations; he still remembered some of the stories I'd told him when he was five and six years old and we laughed the nights away.

When we arrived at Mt. Moriah, he helped me build an altar for the sacrifice. He helped me stack the wood for the fire. But when I suddenly grabbed him and started to tie him to it, his face became ashen white. As I wrestled him to the ground and tied him to the wood pyre, he looked confused and despondent, and tears rolled down his face. I'll never forget the distance that was communicated in his eyes – it felt like a gulf so vast that it would never be bridged again. I lifted the knife as fast as I could, because I couldn't take it anymore. Just then, an angel of God appeared and told me to stop. "What in God's name are you doing, Abraham?" I immediately broke down sobbing and dropped the knife.

"I'm just following God's orders," I explained to the angel. "Oh, Abraham! Don't you have a mind of your own?! What happened to your conscience? Don't you know that some things are wrong no matter who gives the order?"

"Oh no, what have I done, what have I become?"

"You've become a flipping fanatic, Abraham," yelled Isaac. "Now untie me, I'm sick of living under your despotic religious rules and erratic behavior. I'm going my own way. Tell mom I'm leaving home; tell her I suggest she do the same. You need some serious help, old man." Isaac grabbed his bedroll and headed down the mountain a different way. Abraham wept, and asked the angel how it could have come to this. "Abraham, you chose to follow the voice of power rather than the dictates of love."

"But I figured God had a bigger plan. I know a great power like God has information not available to an average guy like me. Who am I to question someone with such knowledge and power?" Just then Abraham spotted a ram, and decided to sacrifice it in hopes of regaining God's favor. All the while, God had been peering down from the heavens saying, "Promises, promises...why do I keep making promises? I will honor my promise to Abraham and his descendants. If nothing else, he's been a faithful servant. But I'm worried about what this means for human history. If a man like Abraham will sacrifice his beloved son on the basis of my authority, certainly others throughout time

will sacrifice their children at the will and discretion of much lesser powers. People will send their children to die in wars of choice because their government says they should.”

God knew right then that the future would include people killing and torturing other human beings based on the commands of people with much less authority than God. God also realized that if people became convinced that it is God’s will to do something like enslave another human being, fly a plane into a building, drink some Kool Aid, or shame somebody because of who they are or who they love, then people would continue to hurt each other and the world would never know peace. God saw that Abraham had made two glaring errors. First, Abraham thought that he could be certain about the will of God. But no person can ever be certain about the will of God. *Lesson number one:* Always be humble with your opinions about God, and therefore, always choose love over power or violence or division. Say it with me: Always choose love!

Abraham’s second mistake was that he tried to be religious on his own. He did not seek help on his spiritual journey from a community. He thought he could do it alone. If Abraham would have told Sarah or others he respected that God had told him to kill his son, they would have made him stop and think. They could’ve helped him make a better decision. If that didn’t work, they could have had him locked up for psychiatric evaluation. *Lesson number two:* we need one another as we grow in love and wisdom. That’s why we cannot be religious without a community. We need mentors to guide us, friends to hold us, and a next generation with whom to share what we know.

All in all, this had been a really disturbing day, even for the Almighty God. As God lay down to sleep, he imagined that someday, *someday* a religion would come along in which people would understand that they are ultimately responsible for their moral and ethical decisions. A religion in which people would know that they must be the final authority when it comes to what they believe and how they act. God knew that in the end, no book, or scripture, or historical tradition, or charismatic personality could provide all the answers for living full and compassionate and productive lives. God knew that such doctrines would too often be misappropriated, mistranslated, misused, and misunderstood. God knew that the only real hope lay in people using their heads and their hearts to create communities where love is the spirit and service is the law.

God knew that even these communities would be imperfect, and even these communities would require a lot of care. But God also knew that they are one of the best hopes if humankind is going to live in peace and unity across all its diversity, and if people are ever going to integrate their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual selves. It was with these thoughts of human potential to create such inclusive and free communities for all souls that God finally drifted off to sleep. God knew that tomorrow would bring with it another day filled with family squabbles, fears, confusion, selfishness, addiction, wars of one kind or another. But God also knew that there were people who would someday commit their lives and their religion to countering these acts, and people who would one day dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and help one another. Despite all that has come before, one day communities will form who will stand on the side of love for whatever cost. People who will do whatever it takes, say it with me, ‘to dwell together in peace, seek the truth in love, and help one another.’”

When in doubt – choose love. I love you. Amen.