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Holy Faith, Santa Fe  
28 June 2026

Proper 8 – Year A  
Genesis 22.1-14  
Psalm 13  
Romans 6:12-23  
Matthew 10.40-42

In the name of the one, true, and living God: Father Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's reading from Genesis, the story of the binding of Isaac, is unforgettable, but rejected – rejected by most modern-day preachers, and rejected by the rest of Hebrew Scripture as it's never referred to again in the Old Testament. The premise of the story is not normative. It's never suggested that a believer should follow Abraham's footsteps at Moriah in preparing to sacrifice his son, Isaac. So says my Old Testament professor, Dr. Ellen Davis.

In deciding to preach on this troubling, but rich, text, I pored back through my notes on Professor Davis' lectures and her extensive writings on this Biblical story. I came to realize that my interpretation of the story was her interpretation, and that I could not do the story's interpretation justice as well as she had. So, following her admonition to preach on the Old Testament as often as possible, and honoring her work on this fascinating Biblical story, I would like to share with you this adaptation of a meditation that she gave on the binding of Isaac.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Davis' premise is this: vulnerability is the condition, the enabling condition, for covenant relationship with God. She says: "Vulnerability, the capacity to be wounded – what does it mean for us who claim to be the body of Christ in the world?"

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Davis, "Vulnerability, the Condition of Covenant," *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2003) pp. 278-282.

For the sign of the cross marks us, the church, as placed in the world specifically with a capacity, a vocation, to be wounded....

“[The binding of Isaac is] a story that comes near the beginning of the Bible precisely to give us a glimpse of this terrible mystery...[T]his story...is hinting at the truth that vulnerability is, paradoxically, the strength of covenant relationship. The capacity to be wounded to the core of our being, wounded even unto death, wounded precisely for the sake of being in intimate relationship with the other – that is what binds [us] to God and God to...us....

“[Professor Davis translates the story:] It was after these things that God tested Abraham, and he said to him, ‘Abraham,’ and he said, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, ‘Now take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and get going to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, where I tell you.’ And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his [donkey] and took his two servants with him, and Isaac his son....And he set off and went to the place of which God had told him.

“Why does Abraham go along with it? This is for most of us the first question we are compelled to ask: How can he possibly pull a knife on his own child? – and not even in a sudden access of religious passion, but in a considered, agonizingly protracted act of obedience to God’s word. Abraham loads the donkey with wood and knife, travels three days to get to the slaughter site, builds an altar, and then trusses up his son like a sheep...So what are we to make of that? Either we must despise Abraham as satanically possessed, or we must consider the more difficult option, that even here Abraham is somehow the father of our faith, as Jews, Muslims, and Christians have

always claimed...So what could it be that we stand to learn from Abraham, even – or maybe, especially – in this most awful part of the story?

“The answer commonly given is that Abraham is a model of obedience, of unquestioning submission to the inscrutable will of God...After all, obedience is a fundament of the faithful life...But...obedience is a good thing only when it serves a cause that is decent, humane, even noble. Obedience that furthers an inhumane cause is servile, detestable, criminal. That kind of obedience was condemned at Nuremberg – how then can we condone Abraham’s willingness to obey the ghastly order ‘Now take your son...’?

“The only answer that makes sense in light of the whole biblical tradition is this: Abraham obeys because he trusts God. Abraham has something to teach us about the life of faith because in him – and maybe, except for Jesus, uniquely in him – we see a trust grown so total that there is not the slightest possibility of choosing against it...In his remarkable book about the Holocaust, *With God in Hell*, [Orthodox Jewish theologian Eliezer] Berkovits works with this problem: Why did so many Jews keep their faith in the ghettos and in the death camps; why did so many gather, at great danger to their lives, to say their prayers and study Torah and Talmud?...Why did so many walk to the ovens or the gallows or the death pits loudly blessing God’s holy name rather than cursing the God who had abandoned the Jews?

“As he meditates on this problem, Berkovits returns repeatedly to the figure of Abraham, and especially to this event on Mount Moriah. Here he discovers the depth of trust that characterizes the life wholly bound in covenant, the infinite depth of trust that holds Abraham with God in the hell of Moriah. In the Bible, Abraham is almost

speechless, but Berkovits gives him words to address God: [He has Abraham say,] 'In this situation, I do not understand you. Your behavior violates our covenant; still, I trust you because it is you, because it is you and me, because it is us...Almighty God! What You are asking of me is terrible. I do not understand You. You contradict Yourself. But I have known You, my God. You have loved me and I love You. My God, You are breaking Your word to me. What is one to think of You! Yet, I trust You; I trust You.'<sup>2</sup>

"What Berkovits shows...is that Abraham and God are intimates. These are two who know each other, who have chosen to make life together, for better, for worse. Abraham is with God like someone who has long been in a marriage that works, works well enough for competing interests to prove complementary, for two to grow eventually into one. And these two have been together for decades now. We're not sure how long exactly, but Abraham was 75 when they met, and he is now something over 110. In the early years, Abraham did not always trust God enough...The relationship still bears scars of that old mistrust. So God does not know (and probably Abraham himself does not know) how consuming his trust has grown until Abraham finds himself doing the unthinkable thing that God has told him to do: 'Now take your son....'

"The metaphor of marriage gives us a context for understanding this crucial fact: Abraham is not relinquishing his fatherhood, his protective responsibility for the boy. Abraham and God are in a relationship like a marriage, and they share a child; Isaac is the child of the covenant bond, [the hope for God's promise that Abraham will be the father of many nations]. So, in the strangest of all paradoxes, Abraham is not giving up his child to death. Rather, he is trusting God totally with the life of the child they share.

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<sup>2</sup> Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Deathcamps* (New York and London: Sanhedrin, 1979), p. 124.

In the end, Abraham knows only one thing for sure: life and life with God are the same thing. Like the Jews who prayed and studied Torah in the death camps, Abraham will not – can not – choose survival, even for his child, over life with God. For better, for worse, it is simply too late for him to choose another way to live.

“So when God calls him, Abraham responds with only one word: ‘...*Hinneni*, [meaning] “Here I am”.’...Because Abraham speaks only one word to God through the whole story, that word *hinneni* lingers in the silence and grows more significant. It is first of all a declaration of attention: ‘Here I am, listening.’ But as Abraham continues in silent fulfillment of God’s command to him, the one word *hinneni* acquires deeper resonance: ‘Here I am, God, with you, in the covenant. Because I cannot live apart from the covenant with you.’ Already, just a few chapters after God makes the covenant with Abraham, we know for sure that this form of life is not one in which pain can be avoided. Instead, what the Bible tells us is that the covenanted life is the only one in which pain can finally be overcome.

“‘Here I am’ – thus Abraham declares his total, excruciating vulnerability to God. Maybe that is the mantra that keeps his feet on the road and his soul in life for that unimaginable three-day journey from Beersheba to Moriah: *Hinneni; hinneni; hinneni*. One word sums up decades of prayer, decades of intimacy between Abraham and God: *Hinneni*, here I am; *hinneni*, here I am, with you still; *hinneni*, here I am, trusting in you....

“[P]erhaps we may begin to understand why it is that this bone-chilling story is appointed for reading [on Good Friday], as we [are called to] walk again with special intention the way of the cross. The road from Beersheba to Moriah is the first *via*

*dolorosa* in biblical history. Abraham trailblazed that path, now tragically well worn by millions of his children, who through the millennia have in trust and pain chosen life with God over survival. Strange to say, Abraham pioneered the way of the cross even for Jesus of Nazareth, the one who makes it possible for us to know Abraham's God at all. As children of Abraham, then, and disciples of Christ, let us pray [this collect that the Book of Common Prayer appoints for Fridays, each Friday representing a little Good Friday to us: 'Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.']