

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Alive in Creation: Redefining God”

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Genesis 22:1-14

Acts 17:22-34

It was a simple experiment. They were to count the passes. The subjects of the experiment were asked to watch a video in which two teams, one in black shirts the other in white shirts, passed basketballs back and forth to each other. The subjects were to see if they could keep track of the number of passes made by one of the two teams. After the video was shown, the researchers first asked about the number of passes; most people got about the right number. Then the researchers asked if the subjects had seen anything unusual. Almost half said that they did not. Those who saw nothing unusual were then asked to watch the video again, this time looking for the unusual. As the subjects watched the video again they noticed a gorilla, or someone in a gorilla costume, walk into the frame, stand around, then walk out of frame. Many of the subjects argued that it was a different video. It was in fact, the same video and the subjects had simply missed the gorilla (you can watch this video on YouTube. It is called the Invisible Gorilla Experiment). They missed it because most human beings see what we expect to see and don't see what we don't expect to see.

I would argue that the same could be said of Abraham, when it comes to God. He saw the God he expected to see. Let me explain. This story, the story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is one of the most disturbing in the Old Testament. Whenever I have taught on this text, people struggle with the concept that God could ask this. They also struggle with the fact that Abraham went along with the request. Why, people ask, would Abraham be willing to take the life of his only son without so much as an argument? After all he had already argued with God to spare the city of Sodom. Why not argue for his son's life? The answer I want to offer is that the God he saw asking for the sacrifice was the God he expected to see. What I mean by that is that the gods of the ancient near east were capricious and blood thirsty. Those gods relished in death and destruction. They relished in the sacrifice of children. Those gods could and would change their minds at the drop of a hat. A promise made was not necessarily a promise kept. So when God came to Abraham and said, “Take your son, your only son that you love and sacrifice him,” this meant that this God who had called Abraham was no different from the gods Abraham had known. He saw what he was expecting to see.

What I hope we will realize this morning is that Abraham is not alone in seeing the God he expected to see. We do the same. We do the same because we are human beings who have been raised with a particular view of God and usually, sometime around the age of ten or eleven, we lock in an image of God and we stick with it. We stick with an image of God that might be loving, or one that is always angry. We stick with an image of God that might be forgiving or one that might be judgmental. We stick with an image of God that is distant and removed or a God who is nearer than our breathing. We stick with a God who is full of love for all human beings or we stick with a God who hates all of those who are not like us. We stick with a God who is grace filled or a God who is legalistic. In other words, we lock ourselves into an image of

God that shapes our faith and our life in the world. But the question becomes, what happens when we meet a God who is wholly different from the God we thought we knew; the God we were sticking with?

This is what happened to Abraham. Abraham thought he knew this God who had promised to bless him with land, children and wealth; who had promised to make him a blessing to the world. Abraham thought he knew this God as he had known other gods. They were all the same; selfish, self-centered, capricious and blood thirsty. Yet in a moment that forever changed not only Abraham's view of God, and would ultimately change the view of much of the world, Abraham met a God he had never really known. This was a God who kept promises. God had promised Abraham offspring and would not deprive Abraham of his only son whom he loved. This was a God who cherished life, including the lives of children. Children were not to be cast aside. Children were to be cherished and loved. This was a God who did not take but gave. This was a God who did not want Abraham to give up what little he had, but instead provided for Abraham a ram to sacrifice. We know this because Abraham names the place God will provide and he professes that God will continue to provide. This was a radically new kind of God; a God worth following and believing in.

It is this same radically new God; a God worth following and believing in that the Apostle Paul presents to the Greeks in Athens. Paul, or as he was known in his younger days, Saul of Tarsus, had been raised with and had stuck with a particular image of God; one that was legalistic; one that only loved the Jewish people; one that demanded absolute legal perfection; one that demanded anyone who disagreed with these views was to be punished. Then one day on the road to Damascus, Saul had an encounter with Jesus, with God. He would never be the same. He discovered a God of grace, compassion, humility and love that desired that all persons know that they were loved and cherished. It was this message that he brought to the people of Athens. They too thought that they knew the gods; capricious, often angry, never trustworthy, powerful, yet at times, not all that powerful. And so Paul offers them a new vision of God. One who is above all and in all; one who is over the earth and yet near at hand; one who has the power to raise the dead. The responses to his message came in three forms. Some scoffed and left. Some wanted to know more. Some believed and followed.

The question for each of us this morning is which of these will be our response when we hear about or encounter God in a way that challenges our preconceived views. Will we be open to seeing God in new ways? Will we be willing to question our preconceived notions? Will we be ready to redefine God if the evidence presents itself?