



**MYERS PARK
BAPTIST
CHURCH**

**A faith community
on a journey seeking
a welcoming, loving,
and just world.**

“THE COST AND OPPORTUNITY OF PAINFUL DECISIONS”

Sermon Delivered by Dr. Reverend Tim Moore

Genesis 22:1-18, June 28, 2026

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Let’s get something off the table right from the start. God did not tell Abraham to kill his son, Isaac. I know it says that in the story, but I can’t believe that. That’s not the God I worship, and the rest of the Bible backs me up on that. If you have a different take on that, we’ll have Talk Back in about 45 minutes—knock yourself out.

So, this morning we’re going to look at this story as a story, as a theological parable that was meant to tell ancient Israel something. And maybe there’s something for us here as well.

The story is one that has captured the attention and imaginations of serious thinkers for over two thousand years. Two passages in the Apocrypha (1 Maccabees 2 and Wisdom of Solomon 10) and two in the Christian Testament (Hebrews 11 and James 2) each have their take on the story. The Quran includes a version of the story, though Ishmael is the son. The canticle, which will be sung immediately following the sermon has adapted the words from a 15th century mystery play. Soren Kirkegaard, one of the first true liberal theologians, in 1843 wrote the whole book, *Fear and Trembling*, on this one story. Franz Kafka and Jean-Paul Sartre both discuss Abraham’s sacrifice in light of Kirkegaard’s work. And Dan Simmons in his science fiction *Hyperion* novels from 40 years ago, takes the angle that Abraham was testing God, to see if God was really barbaric enough to watch him kill his child.

Why does this story intrigue us so?

At its heart this story is about ultimate allegiances, about our ultimate values, and how do we make decisions when life bounces up against those values. And all of us, at certain points in life will be faced with this story. What do our values ask of us? Do we really believe what we say, or when faced with painful decisions will we abandon those beliefs? Does God really ask us to make sacrifices? And is there a line God shouldn’t cross, or we can’t cross with God? **Perhaps that’s what this story does best—it forces us to ask big questions.**

The story begins with God’s command for Abraham to go. The same Hebrew words, *lek lekâ* meaning “Go you,” were used in our first story this month, when God told Abraham to go from his homeland and family and all that he knew to a land God would show him. **Phyllis Tribble says that in the first story, God told Abraham to sacrifice his past. In this story, he is told to sacrifice his future** [Tribble, *Hagar, Sarah*, 51]. In both stories, Abraham is asked to put his full allegiance in God.

Sarah is missing in this story. Given that Isaac is her son as well, it is notable that she is absent from the narrative. Perhaps her last words in the Bible—“Cast out this slave woman and her son”—still echo in this passage. She gave Hagar no voice as to Ishmael’s fate, so now she has no voice in Isaac’s fate.

Isaac also notes something is missing on this journey to worship and make a sacrifice to God. There is wood and fire and a knife, but no animal to sacrifice. “Father,” he asks, using a word that notes the intimacy of their relationship. Isaac is not a rebellious child, a thorn in Abraham’s side. He is a bright, inquisitive child who loves and respects his father. “My son,” Abraham tenderly replies, accentuating the great tension in the story. **His answer—God will provide—delivers a double meaning.** God has already miraculously provided the sacrificial Isaac, born to geriatric parents. Is Abraham offering coded language to spare his son until the last moment of his terrible fate? Or is Abraham still hoping God will provide another, yet unseen, sacrifice? Suddenly, the storyteller offers multiple endings to the story.

Life is full of painful decisions. And let’s be honest. Some of them are the same as Abraham faced. **There are many parents, spouses that sacrifice their children and/or spouse on the altar of a career. A little less barbaric, maybe, but nearly as damaging.** If we choose to follow Christ Jesus, take on this name Christian, and then are forced to confront corporate decisions at work that violate the values of following Christ, what do we do? Do the values we profess drive our decision making? Or will we compromise those values to keep a job, or social standing, or a stash of money, or to inflate our egos?

Sometimes we face painful decisions forced upon us by circumstance, or aging, or the odds of competing interests—decisions where the outcome cannot be known for some time, or where it feels like we are choosing the least of two evils.

When our children neared the age of kindergarten, we carefully considered our options. A top college preparatory private school is within walking distance of our house. But we felt driven by our faith to send our children to high-poverty, diverse CMS schools. *The Charlotte Observer* published an article I wrote explaining our decision and why I was encouraging others to join us. *The Observer* listed my email address and noted that I was the pastor at Sardis Baptist. In the week to follow I received a few dozen notes and emails. A few said that we were sacrificing our children’s future. One said I was noble, but naïve.

And here’s the thing: I had no idea if they were right, or if we were. When we walked our children into Cotswold Elementary on the first day of kindergarten, there was no way to know where this would take them in 13 years and beyond. Maybe we were about to sacrifice them on the altar of noble ideals.

This congregation is in the process of a painful decision. We’ve just voted to change our name from Myers Park Baptist Church to Myers Park Covenant Church—our celebration day will be September 13th. Between now and then you’ll start to see changes being made, but

we'll be aiming to make that the day when we can celebrate our past and our future. Even though we've made this decision, there is no way to see 15 years in the future to know how this will impact our vitality.

Kate Bowler, a Duke Divinity professor, in her memoir *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, in which she described her first year of actively fighting Stage 4 Colon Cancer as a wife, mother of a toddler, and a seminary professor, recalls the words one of her Duke colleagues said to her at the beginning of her battle: Don't skip to the end. She writes, "I think [it means] that we just can't know. And that our brains fill in the blanks, for good or for ill. We want to tell ourselves a story—any story—so we can get back to certainty. . . Plans are made. Plans come apart. And nothing human or divine will map out this life, this life that has been more painful than I could have imagined. More beautiful than I could have imagined. **'Right. That's the secret—don't skip to the end'**" [Bowler 158, 160-161].

Kierkegaard thought this story struck at the very heart of faith in God. Abraham, who had been promised by God that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, now has been asked by God to sacrifice his only remaining son (last week's story created this reality). **To follow this command means that God will break his promise to Abraham, something Abraham does not believe, Kierkegaard thinks, but he doesn't know how it will turn out.**

And this is what living a life of faith means. It means to commit yourself to beliefs and values that are beyond the way this world operates. To forgive 70 x 7 times, to love your enemies, to give away your possessions and seek the Kingdom of God, to seek justice for the poor, to live this way and more means to sacrifice so many comforts and advantages in life that most of us cut corners. We are not willing to trust God that far. We fear it'll cost too much.

Painful decisions about our ultimate values cost us a sense of certainty. We can't know how many of these decisions will turn out. **Will we sacrifice our children, our marriage, our career, or our values, our reputation, our faith?** And maybe by the time we can tell where this decision is leading, it'll be too far down the road to change course.

Kierkegaard suggests Abraham was looking for a way out, for a sign that God would provide some way out. The three-day journey, the long walk up to Mount Moriah, the slow way the storyteller leads to the climax, all encourage the reader to believe, to hope that Isaac will be saved. **And like a good story, at the last possible moment, God intervenes. Unfortunately, life doesn't always work out that way.**

Painful decisions, whatever the outcome, have a tremendous opportunity. And I believe they are worth the cost. They have something to teach us. By the decisions we make, they tell us what we truly value. And clarity about how you want to live, awareness of what you truly value, is a priceless gift. **To understand who you are, what you stand for, and where you'll compromise, if you must, offers a pathway for a meaningful life.**

As you listen to the Canticle, hear the words adapted from a 15th century mystery play, pay attention to the struggle of Abraham is having in deciding to follow through with this decision. And reflect on your own painful decisions. Count the costs. Name the opportunities before you. And like Hagar and Abraham may you be blest to see what God provides. AMEN.