

This Spring, we're asking a very basic question: who is God? That's a fundamentally human question, one that nearly every person asks at some point in their lives. So it's no wonder we have so many competing answers to that question. So many religions offering their ideas and suggestions about the nature of that Person, that force or energy that is greater than we humans are.

As Beaver Creek Church of the Nazarene, we're part of a tradition of people with a very specific answer to that question. We believe God is a Person named Yahweh, who exists as three persons in one God, who became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who is called the Christ, the Chosen One.

Our tradition stretches back nearly 4,000 years to a man named Abraham. Since Abraham's time, we've been learning more and more about who this God is. What God is like. His attributes, his faithfulness.

It's also no surprise to you, I'm sure, that over the years, the centuries, the millennia, all sorts of wrong thinking creeps in. We distort who God really is, we misunderstand why God acts as God does. We put our preconceptions and thinking on God and assume God acts a lot like us, when that isn't usually the case.

I grew up in a church community that really prized spiritual practices like reading the bible and prayer. I was memorizing Bible verses as a kid, and once I got into youth group, I tried to read the bible as much as I could (the goal was every day, but I was pretty proud of 2-3 times/week).

I'm a huge fan of reading the Bible. Of prayer and fasting and giving and Sabbath and all those other spiritual practices. But there's an unintended consequence of encouraging them all the time: we accidentally suggest that God won't love us unless we do all these things.

[This needs to be illustrated somehow] That God only accepts us if we do all the things God tells us to do, that our relationship with God is contingent on us obeying God.

As though God's up in heaven with his arms crossed, glaring down at us saying, You'd better do that... or else!

Have you ever felt that way? As though you're obligated to God? I hear it often in crises: when something terrible happens people say, "Oh if only we'd been better, God would've protected us!"

The problem with that thinking is that God isn't very good. When we encounter that attitude from friends and family, we call it toxic. Unhealthy. To find it in God is... troubling at best.

That's why in this series we're returning to the Scriptures, to the long story of God's interactions with humanity. Because our ancient fathers and mothers had the same questions about God we do. They had the same misconceptions, the same need for clarity we do. So we return to these stories and find that in these stories, God revealed himself in new ways to his people.

And God's people would mark those moments by naming God. They would take God's name - Yahweh, the name God gave to Moses (as we saw last week), and add an adjective to it. Today we meet Abraham, and we find the story of how Abraham came to know God as Yahweh-Yireh, God the Provider.

What we'll see through this story is that God does not need our obedience to love us. Our relationship with God isn't dependent on anything we do. It's wholly based in God's work in our lives. We'll see that

God is actually much closer to us than we realized, and that we follow God not to earn God's affections, but so that we may become more fully aware of God's work in our lives.

[Scripture Title Slide] If you have a bible, turn with me to Genesis 22. If you grabbed a maroon bible on the way in or out of the pew in front of you, you can find Genesis 22 on page XX. And if you don't own a bible, please keep that one. We bought it for you, so consider it a gift!

Abraham was born in modern-day Iraq. By this point in history, humans had spread over a good bit of the Earth, and were worshiping a number of gods. We don't know which gods Abraham and his family worshiped, though they were geographically near to Babylon, and traveled through Babylon when Abraham was young, so it's likely they were at least influenced by the kinds of gods we know the ancient Babylonians and Canaanites worshiped.

After his father dies, and Abraham is the head of his family, Yahweh calls Abraham to leave where his family is settled and go to Canaan (modern-day Israel). Yahweh tells Abraham he's to settle there and God will make him into a nation whose descendants are as numerous as the stars.

Which will be quite a trick, because Abraham and his wife Sarah don't have any children. Sarah is barren. And they're both well past child-bearing age.

We don't know how much Abraham knew about this Yahweh. We don't know how good his theology was - most scholars speculate that Abraham didn't know Yahweh well at all. But he chose to follow, to take all his questions and follow.

And as Abraham travels with his family, with God, he learns about who God is. Through his obedience, his faithfulness, he knows more and more about God, about how Yahweh is very different from all the other gods Abraham has encountered in his world.

More than a decade after Yahweh first calls Abraham, when Abraham and Sarah are 100 years old, they have a son. They name him Isaac. He's a miracle.

The story we're reading today is what happens next:

Some time later, God tested Abraham's faith. "Abraham!" God called.

"Yes," he replied. "Here I am."

"Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you."

The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac. Then he chopped wood for a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day of their journey, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. "Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the servants. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back."

Let's pause here for a moment so we're clear what's happening. Yahweh has come to Abraham and demanded Abraham offer his son as a sacrifice. And Abraham has complied. He's taking Isaac (who's old enough to talk and carry wood - most scholars think he's at least a teen, maybe even a young adult) to

the top of a mountain and he's going to set him on an altar, kill him, and burn his body. All as an offering to Yahweh.

What. Is. Going. On.?!

How could God ask for such a thing as a child sacrifice? And how could any father ever even contemplate actually following through with it?!

Remember that Abraham doesn't know Yahweh's character like we do today. We've had 3500 years or so to learn about Yahweh, but Abraham is the first. As far as he knows, Yahweh is a god like all the other gods the other peoples around Abraham worshiped.

And the gods of Babylon, the gods of Canaan (where Yahweh told Abraham to go), all those gods welcomed child sacrifice.

In the Babylonian creation story (called the *Enuma Elish*) the gods created humans because they were lazy. They didn't want to work all the time, so the chief god, Marduk, created humans so we could do all the work and the gods could lounge around and enjoy life. According to the Babylonian religion, humans were the gods' slaves. And the main way humans served the gods was by offering sacrifices.

[picture of this] In all sorts of ancient religions - everything from the Babylonians and Canaanites to the Greeks and Romans - the gods fed off the smoke of human sacrifices. A person killed an animal, put it on the altar, burned it and the smoke goes where? - into heaven. And the gods gather around the smoke and feed off the sacrifices.

The better the sacrifice - from grains to birds to goats to cattle - the more favor you carried from the gods. The sacrifice was better if it cost you more. Grain was cheap. Cattle were extremely valuable. But not quite as valuable as a child.

It was precisely the value of a child that made child sacrifice so valuable. It was the consummate feast for the gods. In all those ancient pagan religions, if you really wanted your god's attention, you had to offer something that cost you, and nothing cost more than a priceless child.

If that still sounds barbaric to you, good. We are 100% totally anti-child sacrifice. But hopefully you can understand Abraham a little better. For Yahweh to demand a child sacrifice didn't strike him as strange, as out of the ordinary – that was just what gods did. Was he upset? Sure... probably devastated.

But it was what his god demanded, so he complied. Let's read on:

So Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac's shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them walked on together, Isaac turned to Abraham and said, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"We have the fire and the wood," the boy said, "but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" "God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son," Abraham answered. And they both walked on together.

When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham

picked up the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. At that moment the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Yes," Abraham replied. "Here I am!"

"Don't lay a hand on the boy!" the angel said. "Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son."

Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means "the Lord will provide"). -- Genesis 22:1-14

All the way up the mountain, Abraham assures Isaac that "God will provide". But it's not until Abraham's hand is on the knife that God stops him and reveals the ram caught in the bushes. So Abraham and Isaac sacrifice the ram and Abraham names the place Yahweh-Yireh, which in Hebrew means "Yahweh will provide."

This is one of those stories in the Bible that has about 100 different implications - whole books have been written over what's going on here. Everything from God testing Abraham to Isaac's willingness to go to how this story prefigures Jesus on the Cross. We could talk about this story for days upon days (but we're not. Don't worry.)

Instead I want to focus on the Name of God here. YHWH Yireh. Yahweh the Provider. It's tragic that when Isaac asked Abraham where the animal is, Abraham told him God would provide. Because God had provided Isaac miraculously to Abraham and Sarah. I can only imagine how Abraham's voice caught in his throat as he answered his son, his miracle, his blessing from God.

This God who, as far as Abraham could tell, turned out to be no different from any other god around. Sure he had given Abraham a son, but now he was taking him away.

Except that's not how the story ends. God stops Abraham and provides an animal.

There's a subtle lesson here about who God is. Many scholars interpret this passage as God rejecting child sacrifice (which he does explicitly later, in the *Torah*). That God is teaching Abraham that Yahweh is *not* in fact just like all those other gods.

[an alternative sacrifice picture] Yahweh does not need our sacrifices to live. We don't "feed" Yahweh by our sacrifices. We don't provide for God. Yahweh provides for *us*. God does not need us. We need God.

And Abraham sees this there on Mt. Moriah. That he wasn't wrong to follow this Yahweh away from his home and into a strange land. That this god can in fact be trusted to protect and provide for Abraham.

God wanted Abraham to know in no uncertain terms that he's a fundamentally different kind of God than all those other deities people worshiped. Yahweh is not Yahweh-conditional love. He's not Yahweh-quid-pro-quo. He's not Yahweh-provide-for-me-or-else. He's Yahweh-Yireh. Yahweh-Provider. Yahweh-I-Don't-Need-You-So-I'm-Free-to-Love-You-Wholly-and-Unconditionally.

That's hard for us to believe. We don't often experience love like that in our world. But this is the true reason God calls us to obedience.

When we obey God, we learn who God is.

Obedience leads to relationship.

In Galatians 3, Paul is talking about the *Torah* - he calls it the Law. We can think of it as the Bible. The *Torah* is God's instructions to his people. All those rules and regulations we get so hung up on. And in his very Jewish way of thinking, Paul helps all us non-Jewish people to understand the point of the Law:

The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith.-- Galatians 3:24

Paul lived in the first-century Roman Empire. And Roman families used guardians to educate their children. They protected the kids, educated them and taught them how to live as fully-functioning adults.

And Paul says that the Law, the Scriptures, God's commands for us, they're a guardian that leads us to Jesus. When we are faithful to follow God's commands - even those that seem really bizarre, we learn who God is.

Our misconceptions about God get reformed. That's what I experienced - all through growing up in Church, experiencing the legalism we all so easily slipped into. The more I kept at it, the more I just kept trying to follow God, the better I knew God. The more things I realized I'd gotten wrong (and what I'd gotten right).

That's a never-ending journey for me. The more I follow God, the more I try to remain faithful, to do the next right thing in my faith journey, the better I know God. The more overwhelming his grace and mercy become. The more I'm staggered by his infinite love for me and for you and for every person in our world.

[bring back the second sacrifice image] We don't serve God to make God love us. To earn God's favor or make ourselves more worthy of God's attention and affections.

God created you. You are God's beloved child. Nothing you do can ever change that. You can never be good enough to earn more of an infinite love, and you can never be bad enough to lose it.

God loves you because God is love. Not because of anything you do or don't do.

That may not be the God you know. The god you know (or maybe have heard about) may be a cold, distant judge demanding you follow arbitrary rules or get smited.

If you follow God, you will learn that God is the Provider. And God provides you with the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

The god you know may be an impersonal energy that couldn't care less about you. A karmic force that rewards good and punishes bad and you're never quite sure if you've been good enough or not.

If you follow God, you'll learn that God is the Provider. God provides you with victory over sin in your life. God provides you with the capacity to love more than you thought possible, to love those who you thought it was impossible to love.

Why does God give us rules? Laws? Commands? Not because God is a capricious judge. Or an arbitrary, punishment-obsessed deity.

God gave us commands so that by following them we could know who God is. They're our pathway, our guide, to knowing God.

Obedience leads us to relationship. When we follow God, we learn that he's better than we ever could've imagined.

Examine

Where in the last week have you obeyed God?

Where in the last week have you ignored God?

What does obeying God look like this week in your life?

Communion Set-Up

[Communion Slide] The Sacrifice of Isaac has often been compared to Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. Here God did not spare his son, as Isaac was spared. But Jesus followed God faithfully no matter what - even when it led him to the Cross. And for our rescue and restoration, God did not spare himself the pain of death. Rather, Jesus embraced the Cross knowing it was for our rescue.

The night before he died, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. He took bread and broke it and offered it to them as his body, broken for them to provide rescue from sin. We take wafers today to symbolize Jesus' body broken for us, too.

Later in the meal, he took wine and gave it to them as his blood, poured out to reconnect them with God. We dip our wafers in grape juice to symbolize that blood that provides rescue for us too.

On the Cross, God provided for us. This is the God we find when we obey God. The God who does not demand from us but gives to us. Jesus gave us his very life... can we offer him any less?

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to receive communion here. If you are a person who is willing to trust God the Provider, if you're willing to follow Jesus so that you can know him better, then you're invited to share his table.

Let us pray.