

“The Other Story” Osler Mennonite Church June 28, 2026

Scripture: Gen 22:1-14; Psalm 13:1-6; Matthew 10:40-42; Romans 6:12-23

By Jan Guenther Braun

In this morning’s liturgy we have the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac. We also have Psalm 13:1-6 which says in verse 5, “But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” In the reading from Matthew Jesus speaks of receiving “[A] prophet’s reward” (verse 41). Finally, in Romans chapter 6:23 – which was not read this morning but may be familiar to many: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I know what sermon I’m *supposed* to preach this morning; the penultimate passage from this morning’s liturgy in Paul’s letter to the Romans, it makes it abundantly clear.

Most days, I ride my bike past a subway station called ‘Dufferin’ and, not infrequently, outside of that subway station there’s someone with a microphone calling people to repent for their sins and be ‘saved’. I can’t help but think as I pedal further East, ‘Okay, but then what?’. The truth is, I’ve never been able to cut it as an Evangelist. If you were looking for an altar-call today, you may have to ask ChatGPT. But in all seriousness, I think that some of my aversion has to do with the fact that I’ve been told that I’m going to hell many times, in many different ways, and by many different people. So, I’m very sorry, but I’m just not the right person for *that* sermon. It would seem to me that getting saved is the easy part, but it’s the *being* saved part that’s truly difficult.

In Luke’s gospel (chapter 2:41-51) – and not to worry, I know that our gospel reading is from Matthew today, I’ll get to that – we see the account of a young Jesus at the age of 12 going to Jerusalem for Passover with his family to worship at the temple. On the return trip to Nazareth after the celebration, Jesus’ parents realize about a day into the journey that Jesus is nowhere to be found. After three days of searching (verse 46) they find him in Jerusalem in the temple sitting amongst teachers asking questions and engaging in dialogue and debate. Mary and Joseph are, understandably, very cross with their young son as any parent would be after experiencing such a fright. When they find him, he says, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” This, I’m sure, would be an infuriating response for most parents, but Mary recognizes that her son is not like others, and the gospel of Luke writes, “His mother treasured all these things in her heart” (51).

If Jesus had been born maybe two hundred years later, he may have been looking and reading from copies of the Talmud but his time in the temple in Jerusalem would have been through face-to-face, oral discussion only.

The origin of the Talmud is fascinating, and I am certainly no expert, so I'm going to borrow from a [Penn Today](#) article to help sum up the history: "Composed by Jewish scholars of the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., the Talmud consists of 63 tractates in Hebrew and Aramaic. For generations, the laws and customs of the Talmud were authorized to be transmitted only orally in face-to-face encounters between theological masters and students." The Talmud is comprised of the Mishnah which is an attempt to standardize Jewish laws and the Gemara which is a series of commentaries on the Mishnah. And even now, there is a beautiful tradition of studying the Talmud in pairs of two so that you're always bouncing your ideas off another person and the idea persists that one can never really be done studying the Talmud, that it is a living, breathing document.

My friend, Veronica (who is Jewish), has told me that her favourite part of attending service where a sermon is being given is when stories of rabbis arguing with each other are recounted. These arguments are rooted, for many, in the idea of "arguments for the sake of heaven". Veronica was kind enough to send me reading material about "arguments for the sake of heaven" authored by Rabbi Ovadiah ben Abraham of Bertinoro who wrote: "And [with] the argument which is for the sake of Heaven, the purpose and aim that is sought from that argument is to arrive at the truth, and this endures . . . And [with] argument which is not for the sake of Heaven, its desired purpose is to achieve power and the love of contention, and its end will not endure."

You may be asking yourself, "Why is Jan talking about the Talmud and a passage from Luke when our Gospel is taken from Matthew and unrelated?" For the past ten or so years, I've been undergoing a bit of coming to terms with the fact that this Sunday's preacher has adapted – pretty darn well, if I do say so myself – to a brain that might generously called 'messy' and, perhaps, clinically referred to 'attention deficit hyper disorder.' My loving wife, Lindsay, loving urges me to provide more context in many different arenas.

My point is that I have a lot of questions, and I see how the liturgy of this Sunday is laid out, and I know what I'm *supposed* to say. I'm supposed to point Abraham and Isaac and make the connection between a great man of faith – a prophet recognized as foundational in three of the world's major religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and tell you to 'just have faith like Abraham and God will deliver you.' I'm supposed to point to Psalm 13 and forget that it begins in verse 1 with "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me?" and only remember that it ends with "I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me" (verse 6). I know that I'm *supposed* to tell you that "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward," assuming that we agree on who speaks the prophet's words without argument or discussion.

But we are utterly human, lovingly created in the image of the Divine. We are complex and we contain multiplicity. I ask the question: is the “How long, O Lord?” part erased by the “bounty”? Can we hold this multiplicity when thinking through some of the most difficult moments of our lives both individually and collectively?

Let us step into this morning’s difficulty, the story of Abraham binding Isaac in an act of sacrifice and devotion to YAWEH.

The good news is that everyone survives this ordeal – Abraham and Isaac and Sarah – they all survive. Even Hagar and Ishmael are saved after being sent into the desert by Abraham at the behest of Sarah. I don’t think that we should shy away from the fact that, in any other context, we would see the act of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son as a grievous sin; the worst betrayal a parent could commit.

I contend that there is an individualism to Abraham’s actions. He doesn’t consult with Sarah, or with a priest, or with a council of Elders, and he certainly doesn’t consult with Isaac – he runs headlong into this call, his mission is an individual one, known only to him.

Now, anyone of my generation or older in the congregation today who sat in a Harry Huebner Ethics class at CMBC probably, at one time or another, was in possession of a copy of Soren Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. For those of you who haven’t had the pleasure of reading *Fear and Trembling*, I will present my version of a cheat sheet: Kierkegaard proposes to cross this bridge of immorality by invoking the “teleological suspension of the ethical”. Essentially, this is the idea that someone might ignore what would be obviously immoral to pursue a higher purpose or ideal. Kierkegaard refers to Abraham as a ‘knight of faith’, and I’m not expert, but I want to appeal to something I find more interesting in *Fear and Trembling* which is the four ‘Exordium’ or ‘vignettes’ that he presents.

In these four ‘vignettes’ Kierkegaard attempts to get into the mind and emotions of Abraham. He suggests that maybe Abraham spoke with Isaac and told him what he was called to do. In the second, he suggests that Abraham quietly went about his business. In the third he suggests that Abraham asks God for forgiveness for what he is about to do. In the fourth he imagines that Isaac never spoke of the incident and Abraham assumes that Isaac didn’t take in what was about to happen to him before God intervenes.

I appreciate these different versions of the event because the text leaves me wondering what the true cost of the traumatic moment was not only for Abraham but for Isaac and Sarah too. Abraham may have gained a new type of commitment with YAHWEH, but did he lose his relationship with his son? There’s no other mention of father and son speaking to each other or interacting with each other in the Hebrew Bible after this moment. In

Chapter 24:67, “Then Isaac brought her [Rebekah] into his mother Sarah’s tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death.” There’s no mention of needing comfort after the death of his father Abraham.

What did Sarah think when she saw Abraham’s camel train leaving with Isaac? Was she concerned? Did Abraham speak with her and tell her what he was about to do? What was it like for Abraham and Isaac to travel back from Mount Moriah? Did Isaac ask his father about what had just happened? Did he forgive his father for his actions? Was Isaac upset about his playmate and brother, Ishmael, being sent into the desert only a short time before?

What a terrible burden Isaac must have felt – he was ‘the best’. He had just been turned into a critical part of his father’s faith. He was his father’s salvation. Maybe we want to skip to the ‘faith’ and mighty nation of Israel part because it’s the ‘good’ part of the story, it’s the ‘happy ending.’ Similarly, I think that’s how we often talk about death and dying – that someone had a ‘good death’ or that ‘it’s God’s will’ or ‘they died at peace’.

Why didn’t Abraham argue with God? Just a few chapters before in Genesis 18 we see Abraham bargaining with God, he doesn’t simply obey, he speaks back and he intercedes on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In verse 32 Abraham says, “Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten [righteous people] are found there.”

And God listens and changes their mind and concedes: “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.” Abraham advocates on behalf of them, why couldn’t he do the same for his beloved son, Isaac?

Abraham got the thing he wanted. He got Isaac. Why would he not fight for the thing that was closest to his heart? Maybe, this is a denial of death. Maybe, in ensuring that Abraham could control of the life and death of this son, Isaac, he’s is able to control his own anxiety in the face of uncertainty. Maybe after so much waiting and anticipating there’s an urge inside of Abraham to destroy the thing that he’s been anticipating for so long.

I believe that this story is, ultimately, about relationships. YAHWEH’s covenant relationship with Abraham and with the people of Israel is typically our main priority, but what about the relationships that were, perhaps, shattered in this story? Sarah sees Isaac and Ishmael playing together, and she cannot withstand seeing the relationship between the two brothers. Abraham seems to send Hagar and Ishmael into the desert to what would have been a certain death without God’s intervention, and he does so without any protestation. Sarah must withstand the fact that her husband nearly killed her child. Did Isaac trust his

father after this moment? Does Abraham reconcile with himself as a parent and a man convicted in his faith? Can we sit with the discomfort of a multiplicity of narratives? Is it necessary to skip over consideration of 'secondary' characters in this story or over the parts of human experience that have gone unrecorded in order to get to the 'good part'?

In the Gospel of Matthew, the passage that we've read this morning is at the end of the commissioning of the disciples. Jesus has made it clear what the brief is. It comes after the Sermon on the Mount where we're given the beatitudes and we really begin to understand the core of Jesus' message and ministry in the chapters following.

And then Jesus speaks to the issue of broken relationships. He speaks to people being alienated from each other – brother against brother and parents from children. He warns his followers that his message will not be received with an open heart by everyone; it may be alienating.

I have to admit that when I first read this it made me feel uncomfortable. I don't like the idea of Jesus telling people that families will be ripped apart but that it's something that they will simply have to withstand, that it's something that they will have to trust will, ultimately, have a good spiritual outcome.

I want to return to the concept of the 'argument for the sake of heaven'. When I'm standing behind the pulpit of Osler Mennonite Church, I am keenly aware that my mere presence could be cause for argument and disagreement around the coffee table at the Osler Restaurant. Not me, in particular, that much I know, but anyone who identifies as LGBTQIA+ or maybe just because I'm a woman. I stand here keenly aware that at the Tims in Warman, or the McDonald's in Martensville there are people advocating for Alberta's separation from Canada – that is to say, I think it's not a stretch to say that my conversations on the University of Toronto campus with my colleagues could be very different than how things are discussed in these local circles. I imagine that there's a real possibility that members of Osler Mennonite Church may sometimes feel themselves as outsiders or aliens in difficult conversations.

We are living in a time when relationships are being obliterated. There is a politics of 'might is right' taking a vice grip hold of our collective consciousness. With that, Christian nationalism is telling us things like, empathy is 'toxic' and being used to manipulate us.

United States Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth [was quoted as saying](#), in reference to the ongoing war being waged against Iran, "Our capabilities are better. Our will is better. Our troops are better. The providence of our almighty God is there protecting those troops, and we're committed to this mission." Days later, in his Palm Sunday sermon, Pope Leo – without naming names – said the following: "This is our God: Jesus, king of peace, who

rejects war whom no one can use to justify war . . . He does not listen to the prayers of those who wage war, but rejects them.” And before we focus on just one person, let me quote the great author [Arundhati Roy](#), “The thing is, people spend so much time mocking Trump or waiting for him to be impeached. And the danger with that kind of obsession with a single person is that you don’t see the system that produced him.”

I believe that system – the system of Christian Nationalism and the people like Secretary Hegseth represents has a ‘Jesus problem’. What do they do with a Jesus who sees people gathered in community and lovingly feeds the 5,000? Not for money, or power but because it is a basic human necessity. How do they reconcile with a Jesus who heals the sick without asking for payment or whether they have the correct insurance? What do they do with a Jesus who says that it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go to heaven? What do they do with a Jesus who says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”? What do they do with a Jesus who says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”? What do they do with a Jesus who says, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you”? What does a Christian nationalist do with a Jesus who uses the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate that it is the ‘other’, the ‘alien’ in the land who shows compassion, care, and empathy – who bothers enough to save a stranger’s life? What does a pastor with a congregation of 10,000 and two private jets do with a Jesus who says “You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts”? Christian Nationalism has a ‘Jesus problem’.

### **Pause**

As someone who enjoys reading, writing, and studying poetry, I have this very unconscious habit of avoiding the obvious, or firmly stating a conclusion, so let me try.

We should discuss important topics, and I think that Jesus is clear in his actions in showing us that debate and discussion is important and welcomed. I wanted to show with the story of Abraham binding Issac that we can ask difficult or uncomfortable questions and withstand the discomfort. I want to note that Pharisees don’t have to be the ‘bad guys’ of the story but served an important and accepted role in their community. The discomfort I feel in Jesus saying that parents will turn against children, and children against their parents as a result of hearing his message, brings me a little closer to accepting that not all arguments can be ‘won’ or that some hearts can only be soften by only God themself.

I would be willing to wager (although I know that as a good Mennonite, I should be doing no such thing) that as a collective, we are a sort of Venn diagram of intersecting beliefs with some disparate ones as well. I *know* that not everyone in this church agrees about

everything with everyone. We are, however, very much in the service of one and other. Mennonite theologian, James Reimer (may he rest in peace), in his book, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, referring to another theologian, Matthew B. Hays, writes the following: “[H]ays interprets this alternative community that Jesus represents as one that cultivates *communal* character rather than *individualistic* virtue and wisdom.” We may not be able to convince everyone of our point of view, but we need to be in relationship in order to argue, and we need each other to act as deeply rooted rhizomes, grounded in what we know to be the truth of Jesus’ message and mission.

Amen