We call him Father Abraham. He is the father of the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three issue from Abraham, although the first and the last are by issue of blood as well—Judaism through Isaac and Islam through Ishmael. Christianity is the offspring of Abraham by faith alone.

I’m glad I didn’t have to preach this passage last Sunday on Father’s Day. Father Abraham. What kind of father traumatizes his own kid like this and ends up being lauded as the patriarch of our faiths? Well, as it turns out, this one.

This story is troubling on so many levels. I rewrote this sermon three times because I wasn’t satisfied with what I would tell you. Not sure I am yet. When I told my wife, Kim, what I was preaching on this week, she quickly said, I hate that story. And I get it. It seems like we should hate it.

We want our Bible stories to simplify things, to get straight to the point and make things plain. But biblical storytelling is filled with danger. It’s never settled at the beginning. The future is always open.

Bible stories like this one are as complicated as all our lives. Every step of the way we have a choice of whether to look out for ourselves and secure our own future by relying on our heritage, clinging to our possessions, protecting our reputations or putting it all on the line and trusting God to make something of us by our radical trust.

Abraham is tested at the point of his ultimate self-interest. It’s almost impossible for us to imagine the worldview of an ancient nomad, but his heir is his only hope for immortality, the only means of knowing that his life mattered. He sees his son as his only hope for his own future; and he is challenged to trust that the God who gave him his son cares more about the boy than Abraham ever will. This God has proven over and over to side with the weak and vulnerable, not to allow them to be
sacrificed for the so-called greater good—which is always the logic of the gods of this world.

To understand this story—if it is really possible to understand it—we have to see it in light of previous stories about Abraham. Abraham's character is like all of ours—developing. He's had good moments and bad: times when he looked out for others and times when he looked out for himself. Times when he trusted God and times when he took matters into his own hand.

God confided in Abraham about the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah and God's plans to destroy them. Abraham bargained with God and got God to spare the cities if there were only 50 or 20 or even 10 righteous persons living there. In other words, Abraham stood up for the innocent and used his privilege on their behalf. Good work there.

But when he and Sarah went to Egypt, Abraham feared Pharaoh would see how beautiful his wife was and kill him in order to have her. He pretended to be her brother and gave her to Pharaoh as another royal wife. He didn't protect her; he protected himself. They barely escaped that debacle. God had to send plagues on Pharaoh's house to get them out of there alive. Sound familiar? That will happen again one day in the Book of Exodus. Every story has a backstory.

Then Abraham let Sarah talk him into having a child with her slave girl, Hagar, because she didn't believe she would ever have one of her own, despite God's promise. Abraham agreed and Ishmael was born to Hagar, setting up all sorts of drama that actually continues to this day. All families are messy, don't you know?!

When Sarah had Isaac, she got jealous of Hagar and her husband's firstborn son, Ishmael. She insisted he send them away. Again, no argument from Abraham. He argues for innocents he doesn’t even know in Sodom and he won't stand up for his own innocent child here? God assures him God will see to the child's wellbeing. Because that's who God is and what God does. And God does. But no thanks to Abraham.

Now God puts Abraham through the same test with the son of promise, Isaac. Is this poetic
justice? Abraham hoisted on his own petard? Abraham will see how it feels. God sends them into the wilderness and puts the life of his son and Abraham’s whole immortality at risk. How would Abraham react this time?

He obeys. But is it blind obedience? Is that what faith is? No, it’s obedience hard learned. God provided for Ishmael. Wouldn’t God provide for Isaac?

When the boy wonders about the sacrificial lamb, Abraham tells Isaac God will provide. He has learned enough about God to know that God comes to the aid of the weak and the vulnerable. But not yet. He won’t know for sure until God does.

So, does Abraham know God well enough to trust God completely or will he fall back into his old habit of manipulating things for his own sake? God presses the questions: Where do your bedrock loyalties lie? ... Are you serving me and my mission on behalf of “all the families of the earth?” Or are you actually serving yourself, using “faithful obedience” as a strategy for gain? This “test” will tell the
difference, because you cannot carry out this command without renouncing your own interests: your legacy, your descendants, your fame, the inheritance of blessing that would come to your lineage. All that will die with Isaac. Within the world of the story, this is a “command” that can only be followed out of sheer fidelity to God for fidelity’s sake. If Abraham is willing, that willingness will demonstrate that his faith is no longer a camouflaged strategy for serving himself.¹

True faith always requires moral courage. And moral courage is the willingness to let go of controlling your own legacy and leaving it to God.

Our world is a mess right now. For those of us who have lived a minute, 2020 feels eerily like 1968. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, but gains by Black Americans provoked backlash. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Police in Chicago brutally put down Vietnam war protestors in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention. George Wallace collected nearly 10

million votes as an independent presidential candidate promising segregation forever. Richard Nixon would win the presidency on the promise of restoring law and order. It was a clear message to white America that they could trust him to secure a culture where they were still in charge.

Against this backdrop, two Black American sprinters, Tommy Smith and John Carlos, stood on the victory platform at the Olympic Games in 1968 in Mexico City: heads bowed, and black glove-clad fists raised during the playing of the National Anthem. They were vilified everywhere for their insolence.

People thought it was just a Black Power salute, but it was always more than that they had in mind. It was a principled protest, not an angry one. Smith and Carlos had been part of the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Still, it would cost them.

Smith and Carlos were winners. They knew their country would reward them as heroes. They had made it and they would have it made. All they had to do was cash in. Clutch their medals. Play along. But this was the moment of truth and they chose to put it all on the line for something greater than their own glory.

Before they took the stand, they told the white Australian silver medalist what they were going to do. They asked Peter Norman if he believed in human rights. He said he did. They asked if he believed in God. Norman, who came from a Salvation Army background, said he believed strongly in God. He said, *I'll stand with you.* Carlos said he expected to see fear in Norman’s eyes. He didn’t; *I saw love,* he said. On the way to the medal ceremony, Norman saw the Olympic Project for Human Rights badge being worn by a white member of the U.S. rowing team, and he asked if he could wear it. Norman also suggested that Smith and Carlos share the black gloves used in their salute, after Carlos left his pair at the Olympic Village. That’s why Smith raised his right fist and Carlos his left.

Smith, Carlos and Norman—two black men and a white man—sacrificed their own immortal glory for the sake of solidarity with those who were suffering and in hopes of a better world. Stripped of their medals, they spent the next 40 years being scorned by countrymen, working lesser jobs, wearing the world’s
contempt. But as the world began to change, their courage would inspire others. They would eventually be honored.

Peter Norman died in 2006. Smith and Carlos both eulogized him and were pallbearers at his funeral. Carlos said of him: *He was our brother.*

*Here I am,* Abraham says. Three times he says it, making us think there’s something the narrator wants us to notice. *Here I am,* he says when God tells him to go sacrifice his son. *Here I am,* he says when his son calls out to him in bewilderment. *Here I am,* he says when the angel tells him to stop. *Here I am.* “I am present in the moment for what you need of me, God. Even when I don’t understand, I will stand with you, God.”

*Here we are,* church. Are we here for our moments of moral courage? That is always the question for the children of Abraham. Amen.