

“present” at roll call in class and more like a new recruit saluting, presenting themselves for duty with honor and readiness to serve. To say “here I am” is to make ourselves fully available for whatever is being asked of us. It is the deep feeling so many have when we sing the beloved hymn “Here I am, Lord”—a powerful sense of boldness, courage, and openness to doing the Lord’s work. When we say those words, we bring our authentic selves, as Brown encourages, without having any control over the outcome.

Abraham responded to God’s vulnerability with his own. Very likely, he should have said no. But he brought his whole self to each encounter. Most importantly, when he brought his full self toward the confused Isaac, he declared that God would provide a lamb for the sacrifice. Perhaps the whole time he trusted that God would indeed do so. And blessedly, that was exactly what God did; God provided a ram. Then God’s relief jumps off the page at us; God, as much as anyone, seemed consoled that no violence was done to the boy. And against all odds, by being vulnerable together, the loving relationship between God and Abraham deepened. Courageously, and in defiance of that unspeakable situation, love grew. And the possibility of God blessing the whole world carried on.

This story is often read on Good Friday. And for Christians, it’s possible that we can’t fully make sense of it without considering it alongside Jesus’ death on the cross. There, as Davis writes, “we see a [human, a] son of Abraham sparing nothing, totally faithful in covenant relationship with God. At the same time, we see in Jesus God’s total faithfulness, expressed now as excruciating vulnerability, even to death on a cross.” Jesus’ death shows us love and vulnerability; weakness and courage; sin and salvation all bound up together. So in the crucifixion and in this story, we see that love does indeed leave us vulnerable to many possible, and sometimes unwanted, outcomes. But love also invites us into a vulnerability where we offer our most authentic selves to one another—here I am—and thereby choose the possibility of deeper relationship and greater love.

God’s project to bless the whole world is secure. We don’t have to prove anything because God is already certain that this vulnerable way of relating to the world—through love, through the incarnation of Jesus—it is the way to bless everyone. God is already enveloping the whole world in a love that will not let us go. So because God does indeed provide, we can boldly but vulnerably say, ‘here I am,’ never in fear, but always in trust and courage.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

September 14, 2025

14th Sunday after Pentecost

“Vulnerability and Blessing”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14

Whatever angle we take on this passage in scripture, we are right to be shocked by what God asked of Abraham. This story introduces the possibility of human sacrifice, which is deemed unacceptable at other places in the Bible. It asks us to consider a parent doing something unthinkable to a child. And it makes us question what kind of God asks something like this. Presbyterians are also deep readers of the Bible. We look at God’s whole story to make sense of it, not just a verse here and there that we shape to our own purposes. So, when we’re done here today, I think we should still walk away from this story feeling somewhat uncomfortable about it. But I also want us to understand the wider contours of it in scripture—stretching back to the start of Abraham’s story all the way through to the story of Jesus—to make some sense of where there might be a glimmer of good news in it. So with that preface, we’ll begin.

Many people used to think vulnerability was a sign of weakness. But ever since Brené Brown gave a TED talk on it 2010, the conversation about what it means to be vulnerable has shifted. Brown’s research showed that vulnerability is not weakness; it is often the key to courage, empathy, and wholehearted living. One summary of her thoughts on the topic says, “Vulnerability is the willingness to show up and share your authentic self while knowing that you have no control over the outcome of your interactions. Vulnerability removes defensiveness, promotes empathy, and bolsters creativity.”¹ Her view helps us reframe the tricky feeling of being vulnerable and makes us see how it might be a really important thing to experience.

Now, the dictionary definition of vulnerability is: capable of being physically or emotionally wounded. I think it’s possible to approach vulnerability from a fearful standpoint, where we’re worried about that possible and our lack of control over it. Or, we can approach vulnerability from the courageous standpoint that Brown does, where we still know things could go bad and we can’t control it, but we choose to bring our full selves into the mix anyway; because we care about the people we’re relating to.

And I think most of us have a lot of experience with vulnerability of both kinds through our personal relationships. We become vulnerable to the actions

1 <https://www.shortform.com/summary/the-power-of-vulnerability-summary-brene-brown>

2 Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001), 63.

3 Davis, 60-61.

and decisions of the people we are closest to, particularly our families. If we have children, we have no control over their personalities and propensities. Much as we love them, boy, can they wound us with their words or choices. Same with our parents, our siblings, our chosen families, or anyone we deeply care for. We are vulnerable to people's addictions and mental health crises; we are vulnerable to the diseases they get and the care they need; we are vulnerable to their successes and failures. By being in mutual relationship—which is also beautiful and wonderful—we also become vulnerable to what other people do and we have very little control of it. The only part we choose is how we approach that vulnerability: with openness and hope, or with fear and worry.

I propose that the story we read today is about vulnerability. Surprisingly, God's vulnerability, and then, a bit of Abraham's too. Vulnerability in the beautiful yet hard way Brené Brown describes, and in the way of being worried about possible harm or failure.

Last week we read about the beautiful creation story. Almost immediately after that though, the book of Genesis becomes a story of people rejecting God. Over and over again. God tried the flood with Noah to set things right, but that didn't seem to have the intended outcome of restoring the wholeness of creation. So at chapter twelve, God tried something new. God threw in the towel on trying to get all the people, all at once, to live with love and compassion. Instead, God decided to focus on one single family—Abraham and Sarah's. God promised to bless them; and *through* them, God would bless the whole world. That was the purpose of calling Abraham to follow. Some of us know the highlights of this story, particularly the birth of a son, Isaac, born to Sarah and Abraham in their old age. But there were an awful lot of low lights, too; many times when Abraham was not at all trustworthy; when he did not seem to be following God or trusting God's guidance. Just to run it down quickly: Sarah laughed at God's promise of a son; since they didn't believe the promise, they orchestrated a son for Abraham through Sarah's maid Hagar, which resulted in the birth of Ishmael. Sarah then felt threatened by this boy, so Abraham sent Ishmael and Hagar packing into the desert, assuming they would die there; though God, of course, compassionately preserved their lives. Abraham lied on several occasions about Sarah, trying to pass her off as his sister rather than trusting God's protection of her. So to be sure, Abraham and Sarah's track record on trusting God was not stellar.

After all that, we come upon this really difficult story. We see Abraham agree to what God asks. He loads up his son and the wood for the fire, which is meant to consume his child. We don't hear him argue about any of it. We don't know what Sarah was thinking. And this, more than almost any story in the Bible, has us jumping up out of our seats while we read it yelling 'stop, this is terrible! Don't do this!' Yet on the action goes. And so we find ourselves asking that difficult question: why!? Why does God need to test Abraham's faithfulness in *this way*?

Professor Ellen Davis writes convincingly that the answer to that 'why' is because of "God's extreme vulnerability to human unfaithfulness."² She writes, "God, having been badly and repeatedly burned by human sin throughout the first chapters of Genesis yet still passionately desirous of working blessing in the world, now chooses to become totally vulnerable on the point of this one man's faithfulness...We have to take all these things into account in order to make heart-sense of this appalling test, to see why God would go to this length to know for sure whether the single human thread upon which blessing hangs will hold firm. God is totally vulnerable in this matter to Abraham."³ Every good thing God had planned was now riding on Abraham. If Abraham wasn't going to be faithful, if he wasn't completely devoted to God, then this whole blessing-the-world-project God had invested in was doomed, finished, dead in the water. And so that was the purpose of this test. God needed to know if this one guy was going to be able to follow through.

For those who have tended to believe that God already knows everything we are going to do, this story tells us something very different. This encounter seems designed to give God important information about Abraham that God truly did not have before. It's designed to give God confidence about the important thing God was doing. We would never be so extreme, but don't we, too, *wish* to know that our most important efforts will come to fruition? Don't we try all kinds of things to get confirmation that our efforts of care, energy, sacrifice of body, time, and money will, in the end all come to something? That our parents will live safely and securely in their old age. That our children will become healthy, whole people who lead meaningful lives and contribute to society. That those we love who have struggles will eventually overcome them. That the church family we care about will thrive into the future. We want to make sure that the things of ultimate importance in our lives will work out, in the end. And it's so hard to be vulnerable, knowing that we can almost never guarantee those things. Because love does not allow us to control other people or the outcomes of their lives.

I think that fact is at the root of our trouble with this story. Love basically prevents us from controlling the outcome of things. Where there is love in a relationship then there also must be vulnerability. There was certainly covenantal love between God and Abraham. They both felt it. God knew it even as God did perhaps did not wish to be so vulnerable to this one, fallible guy. Maybe that's why God felt forced to go to such a horrible extreme with Abraham—because where vulnerability and love exist, there really is no normal way to know for sure how someone is going to act.

What surprises us though, perhaps just as much as it troubles us, was how Abraham responded throughout. There is a sense in which Abraham's response was actually a vulnerable and honest one. Three times, Abraham said, "here I am." First to God, then to his son, then to the angel. The words sound plain to us. But in Hebrew, they are a bold declaration. They are less like a student saying