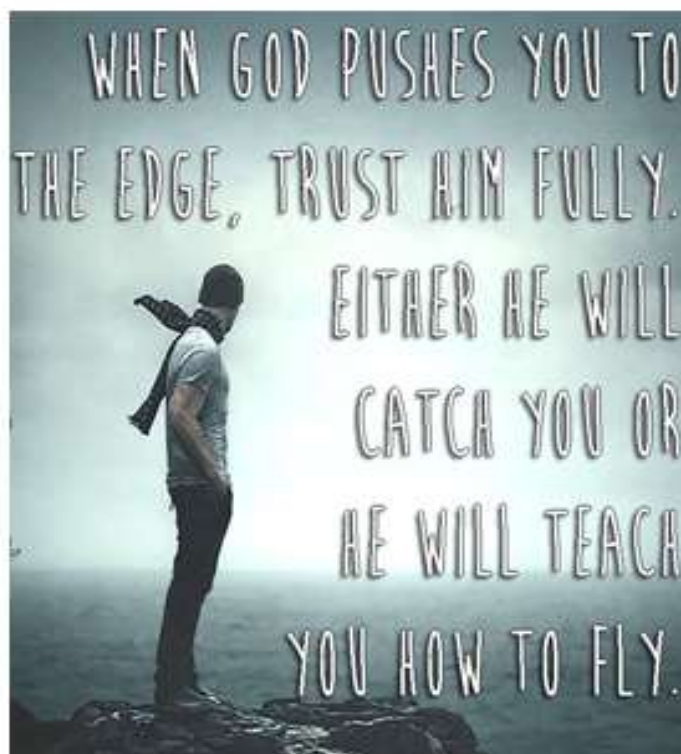


# **WHEN EVERYTHING SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE**

**Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2017**

**Genesis 22:1-18**

**Rev John Barr**



During the Depression of the 1930's the local sheriff in small Texan town is called away from the company of his family dinner table to investigate trouble in the railway yards. A black youth is somewhat disturbed. The sheriff, a dedicated husband and father of two, confronts the young man and is tragically shot dead. Local white vigilantes grab the assailant and drag him through the local streets. The young man is hung on a tree outside the town.

Made in 1984, the movie "Places in the Heart" tells the story of a poor struggling rural community. In the wake of her husband's death Edna Spalding, played by Sally Field, is left to raise her children and maintain the family farm. It's a real struggle as entrenched racism, sexism, deception and corruption beset Edna at every turn. Moreover, the bank threatens to seize the farm as Edna is forced to work tirelessly to bring the cotton crop in.

From day to day there are attempts to undermine Edna while her black workers suffer brutally at the hands of the Klu Klux Klan. But Edna survives and some form of justice prevails.

The movie ends as it begins with people gathered in prayer around a table. This time it's a communion service in the local church. The elements are passed from one member of the congregation to the other. And the amazing thing is that everyone who is featured in the movie, the living and dead, the victim and the perpetrator, the innocent and the guilty, the sinner and the sinned against are present at this meal. As the closing credits role the bread and the cup are shared with the words "Peace of God".

"Places in the Heart" is one of my favourite movies. It speaks to me about the fragility, the randomness and the turbulence of life. Here enmity, malice and prejudice fuel the tragic twists and turns that life takes.

(2)

Meanwhile, Edna Spalding speaks to many of us as her life circumstances challenge, stretch and even push her close to the precipice. It seems as though simply too much is being asked of her!

But the final scene resolves all this. Perpetrator and victim, adversary and benefactor, enemy and friend, opponent and supporter, faithful and faithless all sit together around the Lord's table. They are at peace as the body and the blood of Jesus, the crucified, risen Lord, unites them. The celebration of God's gift to us in Jesus Christ brings them together.

"Places in the Heart" maps out a community that is very much at war with itself. Lynch mobs involving white racists intimidate, harass and murder the local black population. Racketeers manipulate the cotton trade and rip-off local farmers, bank managers demand their pound of flesh while struggling widows and vulnerable children labour endlessly in the fields to make a living.

Meanwhile, personal relationships are compromised and infidelity is rife as locals attempt to construct a veneer of Christian virtue and respectability. Even the forces of nature make their mark as a massive tornado scours the land tearing everything in its path apart.

Indeed, for an honest, God-fearing, hard-working woman like Edna Spalding, this may all seem too much. The "impossible" is being asked of her as Edna grieves the death of her husband, as she battles to keep the farm going and as she tries to keep the family together in the wake of a toxic culture that surrounds her.

And in all of this, "Places in the Heart" claims there is hope. People have a future when they sit at the table of the Lord and allow him to unite them, to bring them together and to wipe away all those things that feed prejudice, hatred, infidelity and corruption. In good old fashioned terms, here God acts to wipe out the sins of God's people!

For you see, God sees our weakness. God knows our vulnerability. God is intimately aware of our fears. God is cognizant of all our faults. And in this "seeing", amidst this deep void that leaves us grasping, God "provides".

God provides by preventing God's people from falling, God provides by reaching out to hold God's people when they are on the precipice, God provides by assuring God's people there is always a way forward no matter how overwhelming or menacing the circumstances.



(3)

Now, this is the way I understand the story of Abraham and the summons to offer Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice. Found in Genesis Chapter 22, this is a difficult, somewhat troubling story. To be honest, it was tempting to look elsewhere for a Biblical text to preach on this morning. But, somehow, I felt called to go back and consider it!

With this in mind, the contemporary writer, Richard Dawkins, has a lot to say about this story of Abraham and Isaac. In his book, "The God Delusion", Dawkins goes on to claim that: *"the god of the Old Testament has got to be the most unpleasant character in all fiction."* Here Dawkins refers to the practice of child sacrifice and the notion that God encourages Abraham to do just that.

Now, if Richard Dawkins is correct, I would happily dispose of this this story and never speak of it again. But I think Richard Dawkins, in his enthusiasm to promote a certain form of aggressive atheism, misses the truth of what is really being said.

For the point of this story is that Abraham actually does not need to sacrifice his dear son. Instead, God offers something in Isaac's place. There is no need for child sacrifice here – rather there is a timely initiative from God that serves to break through the wall of a somewhat tense, difficult, outrageous scenario.

Here, in the midst of what is an impossible "ask", God provides. Here in the midst of the unspeakable God provides a ram to be sacrificed.



And this provision just doesn't come out of the "blew". This provision comes primarily because Abraham is prepared to live with the unanswerable questions. This gift is presented because Abraham is able to journey alongside what are intolerable realities. This offering is made because Abraham demonstrates a commitment to treading a path that takes him to very brink.

And friends, surfacing out of the impossible, rising out the unthinkable, indeed, emerging from the unimaginable comes a gift. And this gift fulfils the need. This gift opens the way. This gift establishes a future.

In the wake of what appeared to be a confronting impasse - indeed a cruel, quite devastating dead-end - this gift ensures God's promises will be fulfilled. For, Isaac goes on to build the foundation of a great nation.

(4)

The location of this story is reported to be Mount Moriah, the point on which the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem was to stand and where God was acknowledged to dwell. And for this reason the story has profound meaning for Jews while Muslims hold this place to be sacred as it marks the point where the prophet Mohammed is said to have ascended to heaven to receive the teachings of Islam.

For Christians, Mount Moriah points beyond itself to the person of Jesus whose incredible life, whose sacrificial death and whose glorious resurrection breaks down everything we may consider to be impossible - to offer us a new way forward.

“Moriah” is said to mean “God sees” and it was here that Abraham bore witness to God’s provision at the time impossible things had been asked of him.

Now the Hebrew word for “provide” also means “to see”. Hence this place where Isaac was to be sacrificed is not only the place where God “provides”. It’s also the place where “God shall be seen.” And the point here is that “provide” and “seen” compliment one another. This is because the focus is on, not attending to our own perceived needs no matter how critical they may be, but on the priority of “seeing” or identifying the provisions God offers.

In other words, the issue is not about us and about what we want or what we may feel we need. Rather, the issue is about God and about what God chooses to provide us with - especially in those times we are all facing the “impossible”.

Friends, there is no better way of bearing witness to this truth than in our gathering around the Lord’s table. For here we receive and here we feed on the gift that is offered unconditionally to each and every one of us in the bread of life and in the cup of salvation.

God may push us to the edge. God may seem to press the impossible upon us. But like Abraham, God provides. God lifts the burden. God opens the way.

Friends, this means God never fails us.

As we share in this celebration of Holy Communion today may we be open to God’s gift. May we learn to truly trust in God’s provision. And as we do, may we be strengthened, may we be renewed and may we be encouraged for the journey ahead.

Amen.

