



in the
Atrium

MARCH 29, 2021

The Voice of God: Scott Bosscher & Ben Zuzelski
(Rhythmic Unison Duet)

Abraham: Scott Bosscher (Tenor)

Isaac: Ben Zuzelski (Boy Soprano)

Piano: Dr. Julia Brown

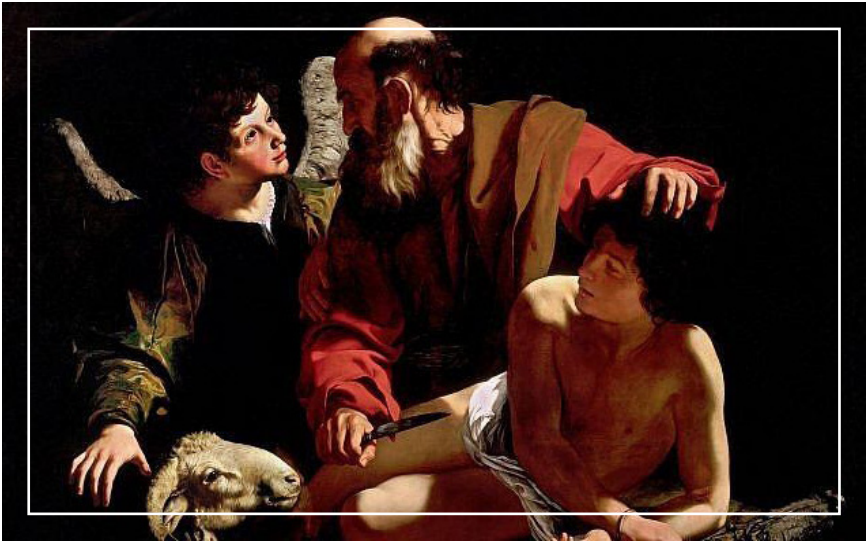
Canticle II: Abraham & Isaac op.51 (1952)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

God said, "Take, pray, your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go forth to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall say to you." And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey and took his two lads with him, and Isaac his son, and he split wood for the offering, and rose and went to the place that God had said to him.

Genesis 22:1-3

There is no way around it – the story of Abraham & Isaac is one of the more difficult Old Testament stories with which to come to terms. None of us really wants to look at this story square in the eyes. Sometimes, however, when considering a difficult passage of Scripture, the best approach is through another lens like poetry. Emily Dickinson tells us to seek out our understanding of truth by not looking straight into the light. Understanding pure truth can be blinding to our earthly eyes. Dickinson tells us to look at the light slant, like a shaft of light cutting through the dust at an angle.



Tell all the truth but tell it slant

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind —

Benjamin Britten's setting of this anonymous medieval poetic drama, based on the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, helps us to do just this. His scoring sets the drama in a highly dramatic scena, using two voices, tenor and treble, which not only perform the respective roles of father and son but also, when singing in rhythmic unison, create other-worldly sound of the ethereal voice of God.

The piano accompaniment, in equal partnership with the voices, lays bare the terrifying, raw conflict emotionally and spiritually at the heart of this story. The work graphically portrays Abraham's agony as he obeys God's command to offer Isaac in sacrifice, revealing also the very human side of both Abraham and Isaac, including the fear and suffering that are often encountered by those who conscientiously follow God. It also shows the gracious reward of obedience: In the willingness to give up that which is most dearly loved, one receives the opportunity to actually keep it is indeed a thoughtful means of honoring those around us who shine their light by being willing to live lives of sacrifice, as well as for those who continually strive for reconciliation in this conflicted world.

And of course, one must never fail to connect this saga of Abraham & Isaac as a foreshadowing of what God will eventually do when he reverses the roles and takes upon himself the command to offer up his very own Son as the ultimate sacrifice of love for the whole of his creation, including for each and every one of us.



Chance

(on a father sacrificing his son)

Luci Shaw (b. 1928)

Did God take his chances
on a son sent to fill flesh?

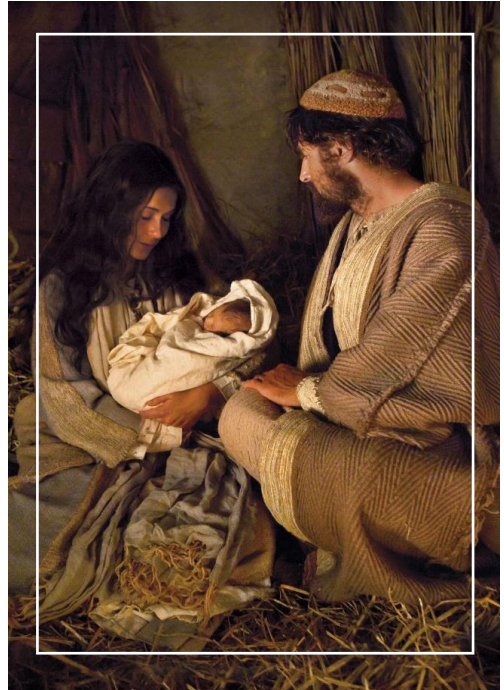
Was such metamorphosis
a divine risk?

Once embodied
might he not find
earth's poignancies too sharp,
sweet flesh too sweet
to soon discard?

Might not man's joys
(the growing of body, mind and will,
knowing companionship,
the taste of shared bread,
the smell of olives
new-carved wood, and wine,
morning's chill
on a bare head,
rough wool,
a near, dust-blue Judean hill,
evening's shine
of oil lamps through an open door,
day's work, tired muscles
a bed on the floor)
make up for his limitations?

Might he not even
wish for a peaceful death
from old age?

Ah, Father, but you knew
the incarnation was no gamble!
We are the risk you run.
Our destiny is not so clearly defined.
It's either/or for us.



And when I say you took no chance,
on him,
he being our one chance of heaven,
I mean rather once chosen, he's no chance
But certainty.

Benjamin Britten: Canticle II (Abraham and Isaac) Libretto

God speaks (tenor and alto together):

Abraham, my servant, Abraham,
Take Isaac, thy son by name,
That thou lovest the best of all,
And in sacrifice offer him to me
Upon that hill there besides thee.
Abraham, I will that so it be,
For aught that may befall.

Abraham:

My Lord, to Thee is mine intent
Ever to be obedient.
That son that Thou to me hast sent
Offer I will to Thee.
Thy bidding done shall be.

(Here Abraham, turning him to his son Isaac, saith:)

Make thee ready, my dear darling,
For we must do a little thing.
This woode do on thy back it bring,
We may no longer abide.
A sword and fire that I will take,
For sacrifice behoves me to make;
God's bidding will I not forsake,
But ever obedient be.

(Here Isaac speaketh to his father, and taketh a bundle of sticks and beareth after his father, and saith:)

Isaac:

Father, I am all ready
To do your bidding most meekely,
And to bear this wood full [bayn]¹ am I,
As you commanded me.

(Here they both go to the place to do sacrifice)

Abraham:

Now, Isaac son, go we our way
To yonder mount if that we may.

Isaac:

My dear father, I will essay
To follow you full fain.

(Abraham being minded to slay his son Isaac, lifts up his hands, and saith the following:)

Abraham:

O! My heart will break in three,
To hear thy words I have pitye;
As Thou wilt, Lord, so must it be,
To Thee I will be bayn.
Lay down thy faggot, my own son dear.

Isaac:

All ready, father, lo it is here.
But why make you such heavy cheer?
Are you anything adread?

Abraham:

Ah! Dear God! That me is woe!

Isaac:

Father, if it be your will,
Where is the beast that we shall kill?

Abraham:

Thereof, son, is none upon this hill.

Isaac:

Father, I am full sore affeared
To see you bear that drawne sword.

Abraham:

Isaac, son, peace, I pray thee,
Thou breakest my heart even in three.

Isaac:

I pray you, father, [layn]2 nothing from me,
But tell me what you think.

Abraham:

Ah! Isaac, Isaac, I must thee kill!

Isaac:

Alas! Father, is that your will,
Your owne child for to spill
Upon this hilles brink?
If I have trespassed in any degree
With a yard you may beat me;
Put up your sword, if your will be,
For I am but a child.
Would God my mother were here with me!
She would kneel down upon her knee,
Praying you, father, if it may be,
For to save my life.

Abraham:

O Isaac, son, to thee I say
God hath commanded me today
Sacrifice, this is no nay,
To make of thy bodye.

Isaac:

Is it God's will I shall be slain?

Abraham:

Yea, son, it is not for to layn.

(Here Isaac asketh his father's blessing on his knees, and saith:)

Isaac:

Father, seeing you muste needs do so,
Let it pass lightly and over go;
Kneeling on my knees two,
Your blessing on me spread.

Abraham:

My blessing, dear son, give I thee
And thy mother's with heart free.
The blessing of the Trinity,
My dear Son, on thee light.

(Here Isaac riseth and cometh to his father, and he taketh him, and bindeth and layeth him upon the altar to sacrifice him, and saith:)

Abraham:

Come hither, my child, thou art so sweet,
Thou must be bound both hands and feet.

Isaac:

Father, do with me as you will,
I must obey, and that is skill,
God's commandment to fulfil,
For needs so it must be.

Abraham:

Isaac, Isaac, blessed must thou be.

Isaac:

Father, greet well my brethren ying,
And pray my mother of her blessing,
I come no more under her wing,
Farewell forever and aye.

Abraham:

Farewell, my sweetë son of grace!

(Here Abraham doth kiss his son Isaac, and binds a kerchief about his head.)

Isaac:

I pray you, father, turn down my face,
For I am sore adread.

Abraham:

Lord, full loth were I him to kill!

Isaac:

Ah, mercy, father, why tarry you so?

Abraham:

Jesu! On me have pity,
That I have most in mind.

Isaac:

Now, father, I see that I shall die:
Almighty God in majesty!
My soul I offer unto Thee!

Abraham:

To do this deed I am sorrye.

(Here let Abraham make a sign as tho' he would cut off his son Isaac's head with his sword; then...)

God speaks:

Abraham, my servant dear,
Lay not thy sword in no manner
On Isaac, thy dear darling.
For thou darest me, well wot I,
That of thy son has no mercy,
To fulfil my bidding.

Abraham:

Ah, Lord of heaven and King of bliss,
Thy bidding shall be done, i-wiss!
A horned wether here I see,
Among the briars tied is he,
To Thee offered shall he be
Anon right in this place.

(Then let Abraham take the lamb and kill him.)

Sacrifice here sent me is,
And all, Lord, through Thy grace.

Conclusion:

Such obedience grant us, O Lord!
Ever to Thy most holy word.
That in the same we may accord
At this Abraham was bayn;
And then altogether shall we
That worthy King in heaven see,
And dwell with Him in great glorye
For ever and ever. Amen.



MAYFLOWER

Congregational Church

ART SONG IN THE ATRIUM is a virtual Lenten series, designed to offer music and poetry, images and scripture readings as aids to personal devotions and a time of meditation.

The series features singers from Mayflower's Chancel Choir and, beginning February 22, will also feature the beautiful Bösendorfer piano acquired in the fall of 2020, housed in the warm, vibrant acoustics of our Atrium.

We are grateful to the many generous donors who contributed to the purchase of our new piano, which allows for projects such as this one to come to life.

[MayflowerChurch.org](https://www.MayflowerChurch.org)

2345 Robinson Road, S.E. Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506
616-459-6255 office@mayflowerchurch.org