

## More about Trust than about Test

Genesis 22:1-14

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### Gen 22:1-14

*After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.*

*When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."*



Let me begin with a quote from Annie Dillard's book, **TEACHING A STONE TO TALK:**

*"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our*

*pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."*

Here we are, on a warm Sunday morning in Bellevue, Washington. Our social schedules are full. We are planning for taking kids to camp, going to the symphony, having church meetings, having lunch, buying groceries, and so on. And by the way, we are reflecting on a story in the Bible where God speaks tells Abraham to kill his son Isaac. No, that is not exactly right. God does not say to Abraham, "Kill your son." In the scripture, God says: *"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."* For the modern ear it is hard to distinguish the difference.

The story has a happy ending or at least an ending where no human blood is shed to prove obedience and devotion to God. Still, this is a hard story on so many levels. It is difficult to know where to begin.

Yesterday, in the weekly Bible class, we talked about our discomfort around this story from scripture. No kidding. Questions abound. A central one is: what kind of a God would ask that a father sacrifice his son to show his loyalty and devotion? As questions go, that one tends to crash head on into a brick wall. I mean, it does not go anyway productive. I am not saying it is unimportant. Quite the contrary, it is very important. But there are many other questions to bring to this discussion, as well. For instance, what is it like for us to travel with Abraham and Isaac on this journey to Mt. Moriah?

*So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.*

What is in your heart when you travel with them as they walk on together? For me, I carry a bundle of emotions, fear, worry, love, concern, compassion, anger. There are many nagging questions along the way. What does Abraham mean when he says to the assistants, *"we will come back to you?"* What is in Abraham's mind when he says to Isaac, *"God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son?"* Is Abraham aware of what he is doing or is he blind to the horror of killing his son?

It is so easy to explain this whole story away by saying that it is a symbolic description of how the early Hebrew people rejected human sacrifice as a way of influencing the divine and bringing about good fortune, like a rich harvest, or rain in the midst of drought, or a military victory over a rival nation. We know from historical accounts that cultures around the world have practiced human sacrifice. We also know that the religious life of the Hebrews and, then, the Jews practices animal sacrifice as way of showing devotion to God. So, might not this story of Abraham and Isaac be that transition point when the Hebrew people stopped this practice? Perhaps this is so. But I believe there is more to why our ancestors in faith decided to keep this story in the tradition and pass it along to the passing generations.

There is no getting out of the language that we have here. It says, “**God tested Abraham.**” The passing of tests is a human practice in which we take part each day. Not only in school, but in the work setting we are given challenges to take on, goals to accomplish, and tests to pass. The poet Robert Browning wrote of this with his words: “Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?” It is human nature to test things. It is the scientific mind and method to propose a hypothesis and create an experiment to test it out. Even as a church we do this when we discern a church purpose and a vision plan to live out our discerned purpose. We will be setting up a list of measurable accomplishments around these vision goals. We will set up tests for ourselves and put our energy into passing these tests.

**But, while human nature creates tests, I do not believe God does.** I do not believe God has any test for us, any hoop to jump through before we are accepted and loved by God. I believe God's love precedes tests and goals and any proof we may identify as necessary for us to be claimed by God as God's own.

A generation of faithful people, long ago, wrote down this story about Abraham and Isaac. It is a powerful story, one full of pathos, deep feeling, and profound symbolic implication. In this story, Abraham was obedient to God to the utmost. He trusted in the giver of all gifts more than he trusted in the gifts. Abraham's most precious “possession” was his son, this real, flesh and blood, embodiment of the promise God had given Abraham of a lineage, a descendant, a people that would belong to God and carry on God's message to all nations. The commandment to have no other gods before God, the first commandment of the Hebrew people, the one dealing with idolatry, comes into play with this story. Abraham trusted in God, the creator, the giver, the maker, the ultimate, the ground of our being, before anything else. The truth of this trust is in Abraham's words: God will provide.

This conclusion is where we, the listeners of today, are called to meet. We have our own stories, ones as powerful as the one our faith ancestors wrote down. We have our stories about life and death, suffering and tragedy, fear and anxiety, challenge and trial. We can frame these stories in different ways and find support in the Christian tradition. I would have us find our support and our meaning in a context of trust. God does not send us suffering to test our faith. God does not withhold love until we have proved we are worthy of God's love. God loves us now, as we are, and God is here to

help us as we deal with the suffering and the challenges of our lives. We can trust God and trust that God will provide our every need.

As people on the Jesus Way, we know that God knows our every need. Jesus has assured us of this through his ministry, his teaching and his healing, his openness to the sorrows of life, even the reality of the cross. This love was not a test of God, but a trust in God. This trust is the path to true life that lasts forever and is with us now. Thanks be to God.

Amen.