

The Test

Genesis 22:1-14

“He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’” Genesis 22:2

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Last week, a friend linked me up with a religion-oriented blog site. I’m impressed that I even know what a blog site is, but I do, and you should be impressed as well.

“What’s your favorite Scripture passage? What ‘life verse’ do you keep closest to your heart?”

That was what the chief blogger had asked. Answers poured in from everywhere.

A frequently chosen favorite was from Matthew’s gospel: “Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matt.11: 28-29)

A self-described Olympic class worrier chose another passage from Matthew with the words of Jesus, “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matt. 6:34) Isn’t that the truth?

A lot of Psalms made the list. The 23rd, the 91, and the 139th were popular. One wag offered up as his favorite, the 9th verse of the 50th Psalm: “I will accept no bull from your house.”

Passages from Philippians were also on the hit parade, particularly from the fourth chapter, one of my personal favorites: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (v. 13)

I checked out the entire list and was not at all surprised to discover that the 22nd chapter of the Book of Genesis was nowhere in sight. This morning’s lesson from the Old Testament is what I would call “a terrible text,” one of the most troubling, haunting, and inexplicable in all of scripture. The plot summary can be done quickly. God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac, his only son whom he loves, up into the hills and to offer him as a sacrifice to God. Abraham and the boy go to the assigned place in the region of Moriah. They carry all the necessary equipment for

death -- wood, fire, a knife. When they arrive, Abraham ties the boy up and puts him on the pile of wood that he has laid on the altar. He raises the knife in the air to stab his son to death. Just as the blade slices down through the air, an angel of the Lord calls out from heaven and instructs him to stop.

In a split second, the execution is forestalled. Why? The angel would say it was because Abraham had passed the test. Clearly, Abraham would have done what the Almighty had instructed him to do. Abraham looks up and sees a ram whose horns are caught in a thicket nearby. He takes the ram and offers it instead of his son to God as a burnt offering.

No, this is not a passage that makes many people's Bible hit parade. It is however, one of the most significant passages in all of scripture, full of moral paradox and perplexity. But then, so is life. It is all well and good to say, as the Bible says, that "God is love," and then go along sweetly on our way, but there is more to God than that, more to life and faith than that. I am not saying that God is not love. I am saying that God is more than love, understood on a simple level. God is love, but God is also mighty, holy, and mysterious. As the Hebrew Scriptures especially remind us, God is not answerable to the human creature that God has made. The human creature is answerable to the God that created us. God has the right to do whatever God wants, and in this instance, for reasons known to God, God wants to test Abraham.

If you were here last Sunday, you will recall that it was God who had called Abraham and Sarah to leave their home in Haran and to journey to Canaan, where God promised to make of them a great nation. They went obediently and in faith. When they arrived in Canaan, they found themselves in a dilemma because they were unable to have children, and it was children who would be the fulfillment of the promise God had made. Then miraculously, through God's power, a child was conceived. When the child was born, he was named Isaac, which in Hebrew means "laughs". Nothing could have been more joyful or surprising than the birth of that baby boy. He was the apple of his mother and father's eye. He was the embodiment of the promise God had made to make of Abraham and his family a great nation. Everything was riding on Isaac, which made the divine commandment to kill Isaac utterly unbelievable.

What was even more unbelievable was that Abraham did not question the commandment, but proceeded to make all the arrangements to get the job done, though his heart was so obviously shattered. The writer of the story is so aware of the poignancy of the scene: the father and the son walking slowly towards the son's death, the sweet, innocent conversation between father and son. "Daddy, how can we offer a sacrifice? We've got the fire, and we've got the wood, but we have nothing to sacrifice." Imagine the anguish in Abraham's heart as he tried to protect his son from knowing the fate that was before him. The writer understood the poignancy, but he was also clearly impressed by Abraham's devotion to God.

Speaking for myself, I am a little horrified both at God and at Abraham. Why would God ask Abraham to do it? And why was Abraham so willing to do it?

There is a professor at Yale Divinity School named Miroslav Volf. He is a wonderful theologian and the father of a little boy named Nathanael. He writes of reading a journal article one day which analyzed the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. As he was reading, his son, then 20 months old, paddled into his father's study. He looked at the journal his father was reading and said, "No pictures!" The professor decided to draw a picture. He said, "Nathanael, give me your hand." He turned the magazine to the last page, which was blank. He traced his son's tiny fingers on the paper. "Could I have sacrificed my son?" the professor asked himself. "No," he said. I understand I'm supposed to admire Abraham for trusting God beyond the limits of human understanding. I am not Abraham." (*Christian Century*, February 2-9, 2000.)

Before all of this happened, we might have been tempted to be envious that Abraham and the Almighty were on such close speaking terms. Have you ever listened out for your name on God's lips? So far, I have not heard mine. In the past, when God had spoken, and Abraham had listened, things had turned out well. God had proven to be trustworthy. God had gone with Abraham all the way. Now, the question is whether or not Abraham can go all the way with God.

I remember the words of an old hymn I sang at church on Sunday nights when I was a child: "Where he leads me I will follow; where he leads me I will follow. Where he leads me I will

follow. I'll go with him, with him all the way." That was the question God asked: Abraham, will you go with me all the way?

Do not think that only Abraham loves Isaac. Remember that Isaac was God's idea. God is heavily invested in the boy. But the whole future of the story of redemption revolves around whether or not Abraham is heavily invested in God. God has to know: Are you with me all the way? Are you going to stay here in the shallow waters, just up to your ankles, or will you dive down deeply and trust completely the promises that I have made to you?

This holy God, with whom we have to deal, asks for nothing less than our all. You might like hearing that, and maybe you don't. But that is the way it has always been. Jesus called the twelve disciples. Happily, gladly they followed him. How wonderful to hear him teach and preach, to be in his presence all of the time. Before they knew it, he was saying to them, "Whoever follows me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to hold onto their lives are going to lose them, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it."(Mark 8:34-35)

I don't know how many contradictions you can take today, but here is a big one. We lose our lives by trying to clutch them for dear life, and we receive them by being willing to let go of them. This was not our idea originally. This is the way God is. When the human race finally proved that it was hopeless on its own, God sent his only son to live with us, to give his life for us, thereby releasing a life-force, a cleansing power into the realm of existence that nothing can stop. How is it that the Gospel of John puts it? "Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) Do you remember how Isaac carried that wood for the fire? Think of Jesus carrying the cross. You remember the thicket where the ram was caught? Think of the crown of thorns Jesus wore. Think of the innocence of Isaac and the innocence of God's only son. Think of the grieving fathers. Think of Jesus who did not clutch to his own life but gave it up, becoming obedient unto death. "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name." (Philippians 2:9) Letting go and receiving life, this is a contradiction, isn't it?

And then there is the contradiction between the promise of God that the future rests with Isaac and the command of God to take Isaac's life. (See Walter Bruggemann, *Genesis*, John Know Press, 1898) No more brilliant commentary has been written than by the great Reformed theologian John Calvin. "Abraham came to the conclusion," John Calvin wrote, "that the God with whom he had to do, could not be, by nature, could not be his adversary. Abraham could not understand how the contradiction might be removed, but he nevertheless, by hope, reconciled the command with the promise and did as he was directed" because he trusted that God would never, ever, be his adversary. (John Calvin, *Genesis*, p.563)

Why did God command Abraham to do this terrible thing? The Biblical writer says that God did it to test him. I do not believe that God tests everyone the way God tested Abraham. He was a particular person with a particular destiny. But I do know that you and I are tested all the time, sometimes by God, sometimes by life. We cannot live without being tested. I believe that Abraham and Paul would have agreed on this, that in the deepest testing that life has to offer, we discover in the heart of it that we can deal with whatever it is to be dealt with "through him who strengthens me." Here's the truth. Not even the most daunting of life's trials happens outside of God's providence. And there is nothing that has to be endured without the strength that comes from another realm.

Every Sunday we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," when we pray the Lord's Prayer. In Greek, the words mean literally "lead us not to the time of trial." We hope to avoid the test, but when the test comes, there is nothing that will be so strong that the promises of God can't handle it. "God is faithful," Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "and will not let you be tested beyond your strength, and with the testing, God will provide the way out so that you will be able to endure." (2 Cor.10: 13) Or as a wise friend of mine once said, "You know Joanna, you cannot prove the promises of God in advance. But if you live them, they turn out to be true every time." That is the lesson Abraham and Isaac would teach us.

So is God good and generous and full of blessing? Or does God expect something from us? (Bruggemann) Who is God? God is full of blessings. God also asks something from us. What kind of church would we be if nothing were required from our members? What kind of marriage

or partnership would you have if nothing were expected of you, if one person did all the giving and the other did all the receiving? That's not much of a relationship, is it?

So many people today are after what I call Christianity-lite. They want all the commitment and responsibility removed, so that their lives will not be messed with. My mother used to fuss at my brother and me when we left the top off the orange juice pitcher. These were the olden days when you mixed up frozen orange juice. "All the vitamins will escape, Jo," she would say. "You won't be strong without the vitamins. All that you'll have is a pleasant drink." People want pleasant Christianity. They want it without a call to radical commitment and self-giving love. But they won't find anything that is meaningful in that kind of discipleship. You only find the true meaning of faith when you do not count the cost. You find it when you give up your own ego so that your higher, God-trusting self can emerge. There is a word I am looking for. The word is "sacrifice." That's the word.

Will Willimon writes of a time at his church in Durham when he taught the story of Abraham and Isaac. In the class discussion, he was trying to gin up some conversation, "What does this old story mean? I mean, we're sort of put off by it, the notion that anyone would think that God wanted Abraham to sacrifice his child, aren't we?"

"God still does," interrupted a woman, an older woman, hair graying, wearing a flowered dress, hands nervously twitching in her lap. "He still does."

"How?" I asked.

Quietly, with tears forming in her eyes, she said, "We sent our son to college. He got an engineering degree. But he got involved in this church, not a Methodist church, a fundamentalist church. He married a girl in the church. Then they had a baby, our only grandchild. Now he says God wants him to be a missionary and go to Lebanon. Take our baby, too." She began to heave to and fro, sobbing.

The silence was broken again, this time by a middle-aged man. "I'll tell you the meaning this story has for me. I've decided that I and my family are looking for another church."

"What?" I asked in astonishment. "Why?"

Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I'm near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham's God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know *that* God."

Someone else was crying now, a young woman whom I had never even met, a new member of the congregation.

“Gloria wanted me to tell you,” said the woman sitting next to her with her arm around her, “that her husband left her and the two children last week. She wants us to pray for her.”

And so, the sky darkens, the wind howls, a young man walks up another Moriah, driven by a God who demands everything and who stops at nothing. Unlike Abraham, he carries a cross on his back rather than sticks for the fire, like Abraham, obedient to a wild and restless God who is determined to have his way with us, no matter what the cost. (*On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, Abingdon Press, 1984, p. 82-83)

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer. Amen.