

## Sermon 06-28-20

*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." **Genesis 22:1-14***

I can still recall being in school when, on days we least expected it, the teacher would say, "please take out a clean sheet of paper" and we knew we were about to have a pop quiz. My hands still get sweaty thinking about those unexpected tests! A test can change the direction of our journey, can help us see what we are doing well or not so well.

Whatever direction our journey takes in life, there is always the possibility of a pop quiz, or a test, because throughout life we are continually being called by God to journey in new and unknown directions. And Abraham was no different.

His life was one long journey, full of tests and challenges. Although God promised Abraham both land and offspring, his behavior was at times less than righteous – he failed a few tests! He was not a perfect patriarch. But he was on a journey, learning to trust God, and his response was "Here I am!" Our OT reading today is not pleasant. In fact scholar Ellen Davis states that "Abraham and his god are appalling!"

In the story of the binding of Isaac that we hear today, it is clear from the start that God is testing Abraham. First three words...God tested Abraham! God calls Abraham yet again, as God has done all through the Genesis story. "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." God 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." Yet again Abraham is called, is asked to take a journey, to walk with God into an unknown future, to discover what God would show him.

In our Zoom Bible study we have talked about the perceived difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. It's hard for us to understand the ways of a wrathful, vindictive god. We want answers, and we are used to science providing the answers. In Abraham's world, there was no science, there were no archeological finds; there was only God. And whatever happened, good or bad, was believed to be from God, or from other pagan gods. It was the only way they made sense of life events, whether good or tragic. This does not mean we

cannot apply what we know now to an ancient text, but we do need to know the difference between assumptions we make now and what they believed then.

Violence was a part of their world. Because other nations worshiped other gods and performed rituals like child sacrifice, Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac to God was not seen *at that time* to be the horrendous act we know it to be today. We can compare this to other earlier cultural norms that we no longer accept, such as slavery or polygamy. Abraham believed he was being obedient to God. Sometimes we think we are being obedient until God shows us differently. So where is God's grace in this story for us?

At the center of the story is the faithfulness to God's call, the uncertainty of the journey, and our response. And what about the idea that God tested Abraham? Does God test us? The Hebrew word used here is *nasah* and it is not a negative word; it means to examine something to prove it to be true or reliable. There is testing throughout scripture – God tests the people to see if they will be faithful in relationship, and the people test God to prove that God is trustworthy. We are testers by nature. We test drive a car before we buy it; we test the ice on the pond before skating on it. We test a restaurant before we decide to have dinner there by reading customer reviews. And we test God and one another as well. It's how we begin to develop relationships. It's in the testing that we learn more about each other, begin to trust, begin to feel safe and make ourselves vulnerable to one another. Seeing Christ in others is how we come to know him more fully.

As we journey through life there will be many tests, many challenges. We will not always make an A or even pass the test. But God is trustworthy and is with us even when we fail. And we will learn from our failures. We will learn that we never have all the answers. We will learn to stay on the journey with all its uncertainty, and we will learn to let go of our assumptions and look for what God will show us. Abraham's journey with God, despite its ups and downs, had formed a solid relationship of trust. Our journey with God is ongoing and grows in trust through all of the challenges in our lives.

We have unanswered questions. We have had expectations shattered and experienced things we do not understand. We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. There are things that we refuse to let go of, that we have not yet given to God. It's all part of our journey. The grace is that God sees what we cannot see. God sees another way when we think we see the only way. Do we trust God's seeing or do we keep trying to see on our own?

The story ends with an angel staying Abraham's hand. This God, our God, doesn't want human blood. Only humans have wanted that. God is not bloodthirsty. The story is designed to change our minds about God. And maybe, just maybe, when we've changed our minds about God, we will change our minds about each other. I believe that this is what Jesus is about. His way of living embodied God's way of being.

Jesus never said, 'If you hit me I'll punch back ten times harder.' Jesus said, 'Turn the other cheek.' Jesus never said, 'Crush your foes and destroy their families.' Jesus said, 'Love your enemies.'

In the story of Isaac's binding, and in Jesus' life and teaching, we see that God is not vengeful or bloodthirsty. God blesses. God nurtures growth and makes peace. God gives life. Our violence and hatred does not honor this God. The blood that we spill does not honor this God. This God desires only one kind of sacrifice: 'To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Micah 6:8 and Jake Owensby <https://jakeowensby.com/2017/06/30/is-god-bloodthirsty/>

