

The Test

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 Pentecost 15-A
 Genesis 21.1-3, 22.1-14

Rev. Kara Markell
 Lake Washington Christian Church

21:1-3 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

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 us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I feel like I jumped into the deep end of the pool this week. After the beautiful and inspirational text of the creation story last week, I questioned my decision to try the Narrative Lectionary in week 2. There is no two ways around it: this story is troubling. My only consolation is that most of the commentators I read this week agree that this is a troubling story. It is one of the most theologically challenging stories we have. It poses serious questions about the

nature of faith and the way God relates to faithful persons. And, it is notoriously difficult to interpret. So, we have to be careful. We need to resist, if at all possible, an easy resolution to the tension within the story. I am sharing with you the best thoughts I have at this point and invite you to consider for yourself what meaning this story has for you.

Last week, we talked about the God of life – the God who invites creation into being and who delights in that very creation. The God who gives humans the unique vocation of caring for creation the way that God would care for it. This week's story, on the surface, calls all that into question. How could a God who gives life, ask a father to take it away?

I think Sandra Schneiders' model of considering the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text is helpful here. In the world behind the text child sacrifice happened more often than we'd like to think. Certainly, in cultures around the people of Israel. But also, in Israel itself. There are injunctions against it in the Hebrew scriptures, which indicates that it was happening. Some biblical scholars believe that this story is reinforcement of those rules prohibiting such sacrifices; the final word that God does not demand or encourage people or communities to sacrifice children. I also say, yes, to that...but there's more.

The world in front of the text, the lenses we bring to the reading of the story, can lead us to judge Abraham an awful parent. How could he even consider following through on such a request. People who hear voices tell them to do things like that are crazy or criminal. On the other hand, who wants to believe in a God who asks this kind of sacrifice, especially of a couple who for years experienced infertility well into their elderly years; of a father who has already

said goodbye to his only other child, Ishmael? And what about the covenant? How can that possibly come to fruition now?

In the world in front of the text we try to put ourselves in Abrahams' shoes. But it's impossible really. We call CPS on a parent like that, or worse. But if we can take a step back from the act itself, we can see that Abraham is presented with two wrong choices: To obey God here seems wrong, and to disobey God also seems wrong. What do you do if your only options are bad options? Perhaps he is trying to do what he thinks he should do. Do we not also now face moments when we have to choose between two wrong choices. Sometimes they involve our children. For example, should we send our young people off to intervene, even engage in acts of war across the globe, or shall we let an evil government abuse, enslave and exterminate peoples without intervening. In my opinion, no good option. Based on the information and our faith we choose one.

But I want to suggest today, that if we can set aside our 21st century lens, for just a bit, the world of the text deserves to be read for its own merits. The premise of the whole story is this: God tests Abraham. That alone may be a theological stumbling block for you or perhaps not. But that is the claim of the story. It is not the only claim in the bible that God tests individuals. The most famous of those stories is probably Job.

So, why would God do that? In a culture where gods are numerous, the Hebrew God initiates tests to identify God's people, to see who is serious about faith. Testing shows up regularly in the story of the people of Israel. The God of the covenant expects undivided loyalty. Testing often comes in times of difficulty when another option seems easier, less demanding than what we think this God is calling us to do. The test is whether the individual or community mean what

they say about their faith in a God who promises and provides. The test enables God to re-establish the covenant with a people or person truly committed to that covenant relationship.

And while God tests and God also provides. The story says we do not have to choose between these two things. It acknowledges the tension of these two realities in the life of faith. To believe in a time of great crisis that God will provide, can, from the outside, look a little crazy. And sometimes, friends, we humans in our finitude, get it wrong. That's why we need a community to help us process whatever we might think God is telling us to do.

There are some other clues in the text that help us understand that it's a story about faithfulness. Abraham has proven that he is a man of tremendous faith. When God asks him to pick up his entire household and move to an unknown place, he does it. When God tells him through three messengers that he and Sarah will have a baby in their old age, he trusts that. When God tells him that he and his entire household, including everyone who works for him to be circumcised, he follows through. When Abraham pleads with God to save the city of Sodom, he trusts that God will do so. When God tells Abraham to do what Sarah asks and send Ishmael and Hagar away, he does it. His track record of faithfulness (however we might feel about his decisions) is pretty good.

When God speaks to Abraham in vs. 1 Abraham he responds with "Here I am." But the Hebrew word is more than just "Hi" or "What do you want." The word "*hinneini*" in Hebrew means "I am fully present, ready to listen and obey." He has honed this skill of being fully in the presence of God; God and Abraham talk a lot. But now God wants to know something and so he asks Abraham for the ultimate sacrifice. And, as we might expect from Abraham, he obeys.

But then there is vs. 5. Abraham says to his servants, *"Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."* Does Abraham already believe that God will intervene somehow? Is Abraham following through on this so that God will prove God's faithfulness? That might be supported by the next scene in which Isaac calls out: *"Father!"* And he said, *"Here I am, my son."* Same response Abraham expressed toward God, full presence. Then Isaac follows that with a question about the lamb and Abraham responds with the central verse of the entire story, "God will provide the sheep for his burned offering." God will provide. He doesn't know how, or what exactly. But Abraham trusts that God will provide.

And of course, God does. At the moment of Abraham's darkest challenge an angel, a divine messenger, intervenes calling out to him "Abraham!" And of course, Abraham responds "Hinneini", "Here I am". God speaks into the moment of his greatest struggle and provides another way. And what are the test results? What does God know now that God didn't know before? *"...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."* Now God knows the depth of Abraham's faithfulness, and Abraham knows the depth of God's faithfulness to God's promise and God's ability to provide.

As Christians, we see, prefigured in this story, the story of Jesus. In John's gospel, John the Baptist proclaims upon meeting Jesus, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" In that chapter of the story of salvation, God follows through in a way that Abraham was not required to. God sacrifices his only son, or rather, God sacrifices God's self to show the depth of God's faithfulness.

Martin Luther suggested that we read the Isaac story through the lens of the resurrection. Not that Isaac was raised from the dead, but rather that the God of resurrection, the one who surprises us with life, does in fact keep God's promises when the facts seem otherwise. Jesus has a moment in the garden when he prays that God would intervene so that he doesn't have to go down the path that lies ahead to crucifixion. But he also absolutely trusts that God will provide; that God can make a way where there is no way. Not my will, but your will be done. And ultimately, God provides life, not through a substitution of the ram, but by the power of the resurrection.

The tension between feeling tested and awaiting God's provision exists in the life of discipleship. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10 "God is faithful, and will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." Testing of our faith can't be avoided, but with God it can be endured. This is why in the gospels Jesus teaches his disciples to pray and we do so every week, "Save us from the time of trial". We ask that God would not test us like this. But we also pray "deliver us from evil" and "give us this day our daily bread." We pray for God's gracious provision. Through Jesus, God proclaims the lengths to which God is willing to go to provide life.

I think our faith is tested. I can think of the handful of times when my faith has really been tested by the circumstances of life, and you can, too. Whether you believe that God sends those tests or not, the truth remains, God is present through it, God will provide in the midst of it, even when we haven't got the foggiest idea how. Even when we feel like we don't have any good options, we

can strive to be keen listeners, fully present to God, as faithful as possible in our actions and trust in God to take care of the rest.

Faith then, according to this story, is saying “yes” to the promise and to the test. And perhaps, when our faith is mature, we can say with the apostle Paul, as he does in Romans 5, we stand fully in the grace of God and “we also boast in our sufferings, [in being tests] knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Amen.