

## Testing, Trusting, and Providing

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### Genesis 22:1-14

22:1 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 22:2 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." 22:3 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. 22:4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 22:5 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." 22:6 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. 22:7 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?" 22:8 Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. 22:9 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. 22:10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 22:11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 22:12 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." 22:13 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. 22:14 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."

Our text this morning is a familiar one, but it is one on which I have never preached. There are times when perhaps it would be best to read the text and simply sit down, but this is both a rich as well as a challenging passage. Rich because of its imagery, and challenging because of its content.

Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice as a burnt offering his beloved son Isaac, his only son whom he loves. With not a second of hesitation, Abraham organizes an expedition for this purpose including two servants, a donkey and the necessary supplies of wood, a knife, cords and fire. They travel three days and then God shows Abraham the mountain in the distance where the sacrifice is to take place. Abraham commands the servants to wait there, assuring them that both he and Isaac will return. As Abraham and Isaac walk on by themselves, Isaac sees all the supplies for a sacrifice with the exception of the lamb. He questions his father about this omission. Abraham answers, God himself will provide the lamb. This answer must satisfy Isaac as he doesn't speak again. When they arrive at the place God showed him, Abraham builds an altar, arranges the wood, binds his son, and places him on top of the wood. Abraham lifts the knife to kill Isaac and God stops him, saying, Abraham, Don't touch him; now I know you fear God. At that very moment, Abraham looks up and sees a ram, caught in the thicket. The ram then serves as the sacrifice in place of Isaac and Abraham aptly names this place, The Lord will Provide.

How are we to interpret this story? Do we come at it from a literal position? If that is the case, then who among us is willing to sacrifice his or her child at the directive of God? Can you imagine taking the life of your child? If you have teenagers, then from time to time, this might be understandable. But all joking aside, I have two teenaged sons and my experience as a parent is just the opposite. I am instinctively drawn toward doing any and everything in my power to protect them from themselves and what harm might befall them as they grow into manhood.

So try then and picture Abraham standing over his son, whom he has just bound and laid on an altar of wood, knife in hand ready to cut his son's throat. There is no hesitation on Abraham's part as he hears God's testing of his faith. What is all the more difficult to grasp is that this is his only son, his heir. With Isaac's death, Abraham's lineage dies out. Nothing could be more valuable or meaningful than the survival of your tribe through your male sons. This is unimaginable to our modern ears. It was unimaginable to ancient ears as well. After all, your heirs were your future. Abraham risked wiping out the promise of a future in the sacrifice of Isaac, his only son. One thing nomadic tribes knew was vulnerability and obedience to God. Some years there was enough food, some years not. Some years there was plenty of water, some years not. One sandstorm, one infection, one childbirth gone wrong and life was extinguished like that. Nomadic tribes, of necessity, shared resources and a common life. Since they were always on the move, they could not accrue great stores of food and supplies. They took with them only what they needed and only what they could carry. They understood well the fragility and tenuousness of their existence. They knew that life was truly a gift from God.

We are at a distinct disadvantage living in our 21st Century world. Yes, we benefit from the technological advances of indoor plumbing and in vitro fertilization, of antibiotics and electricity. But how much farther are we from depending on and being obedient to God than our ancestors in ancient Israel? How much easier it is to maintain the illusion that we are the ones in control, that we are the creators of our own world. The more material goods we have, the more cyber-capabilities we develop, the more we have to lose, the more we have to protect, the more we must shore up our security to ensure our independence. Our independence is the illusion. Our independence is the idol. Perhaps the most

painful realization to emerge out of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 was just how vulnerable we really are. We have lulled ourselves into a false sense of invincibility and self-sufficiency.

As a country and a people, we believe we that somehow we are in control. We have not attained Abraham's level of faith, for he put his full trust in God to provide. Much to our horror and disbelief, in this scene Abraham operates unflinchingly from beginning to end as if God alone is in control.

But this level of faith is a new step for Abraham. He did not start out that way. You recall that much of what motivates the stories of Abraham and his wife Sarah is their desire for an heir. When Abraham was 75, God called him and said, Go. Leave your country. Go to the land I will show you and I will make of you a great nation. Sounds a bit risky but the idea of descendants is appealing so off Abraham goes, taking only his wife and his nephew Lot. Time passes. Abraham is human. He gets impatient, waiting for God's promise to be made manifest. But God's love and commitment are steadfast and so he makes a covenant with Abraham. Abraham complains that he is still childless, that an offspring born to a slave in his house is not exactly what he had in mind for a descendant. God reassures him, your issue shall be your heir and your descendants will be as numerous as the stars. God's word seems to allay Abraham's concern for a while. Time passes. Now Sarah gets impatient. She continues to be barren so she convinces Abraham to lie with her slave, Hagar. Maybe this is what God meant that Abraham's issue will produce an heir. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael and this infuriates Sarah who eventually kicks Hagar and her illegitimate son out into the wilderness. More time passes. Abraham and Sarah continue their itinerant existence and pretty much give up on the dream of an heir. But God's love and commitment are steadfast so he

reaffirms the covenant with Abraham and promises a son to be born to Sarah within the year. Sarah who is now 90, laughs at the absurdity of this idea. But God laughs back, and says, 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?' When Abraham is an old man of 100, Sarah gives birth to the son they have been waiting for. Isaac, the answer to their prayers, is born. God finally fulfilled their dreams. But wait, the very next episode in this story is today's lesson. God commands Abraham to make a sacrifice of Isaac. Why would God seek to destroy this child, the object of all of their hopes and dreams? He doesn't. God fully intends for Isaac to be the descendant through which the Covenant to the people of Israel will be established. But God does seek to destroy the idol that Abraham has made of having an heir. God's love of Abraham is so deep and so strong that he creates the ultimate test for Abraham's faith formation. God exposes the only idol that Abraham placed before God. And in this scene, Abraham passes with flying colors.

The longer I sit with this story, I don't believe for a moment that God intended to let Isaac die. After all, the ram was already in place, caught in the thicket. It's just that Abraham couldn't see the ram, until he had been willing to sacrifice that which was dearer to him than God. This unflinching obedience to God was the pivotal step in Abraham's faith journey. When I first read the lessons for today from the lectionary, I was excited at a familiar text and story such as this one. Carol had told me last Sunday they would need the sermon title and text before Tuesday, and while I had been thinking and praying about what I would say, the sermon muse wasn't speaking. I thought, this can't be that hard – God tested Abraham, Abraham trusted God, and God provided. There was my sermon title and three points to boot. Easy. Right!! I was about to be tested and didn't even know it; I would need to trust God yet again and hope that the words of a sermon would

indeed be provided. Did I pass the test, was my trust misguided and did God provide? I'll let you be the judge. So, back to the text.

Does God test us and if so, how does God test us? Well, for starters, I don't believe that God tests us in the same manner that he tested Abraham. How many of you remember Andrea Yates from Houston, Texas who drowned her five children or closer to home Susan Smith who similarly murdered her two sons by drowning or David Crespi, the local banker who stabbed his twin daughters to death? Those acts and the deaths that resulted from them sparked outrage and sadness across our nation. I do believe that God does indeed test us, but it is not in that particular way. The challenge for us is to be faithful and obedient, as Abraham was faithful and obedient.

We make promises and covenant with God and then struggle to be faithful and obedient. Let me give you a few examples of what I am talking about. When someone new joins our congregation we repeat the following: **“we renew our covenant *faithfully* to participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.** We also make promises in joining together in the covenant of marriage: **I take you to be my wedded partner, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto, I pledge you my faith.** These covenants test our faithfulness, our obedience, and our trust and reliance upon God. And sadly, often we are found wanting. Think for a moment about different times and places in your life when your faith and obedience were challenged.

Abraham becomes a role model for us as he moves out on faith in response to God's challenge to him to sacrifice his only son, the heir that is to provide Abraham with descendants as numerous as the stars. As he and Isaac walk up on the mountain, Isaac notices there is no sacrificial animal. "The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Here we see evidence of his trust in God – "God himself will provide a lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Do we trust God, really trust God? Moving back to North Carolina from far west Texas was something I found myself wanting to do shortly after my mother died suddenly in 1990. But my reasons were more emotional than reasonable, and I did not believe that I had not yet accomplished everything I had wanted to do professionally in Texas. So I waited, and worked, and prayed for a sign. My prayer was a specific one – Help me to return to my roots and my family. And I waited some more. Then in late 1999, I changed my prayer from a selfish one to a more open-ended and hopefully honest prayer – where do you want me to serve? Within months, a process began that would ultimately culminate in my return twelve years after my mother's death. I was excited and scared. I had just had the best year of my professional career financially, was established in the professional community and covered up with work. I began to wonder if perhaps I had lost my mind and was making a huge mistake, moving my family from the only home they had ever known, just so I could selfishly return "home." Anxiety gave way to fear. Moving to Texas had been easy compared to this. I moved without a family and the responsibility that entailed, and finding an apartment had been easy. Here I was moving back with a family and to move into a home comparable to the one we had sold had us looking at sticker prices that were more than double what we had sold our home for. Fear gave way to panic, and the only way I could see to get through this experience that I had put us on was to take a stance of surrender. I found myself surrendering my fear and struggling to trust that this was indeed the

right thing for all of us. From the perspective of today, I can truthfully say NOW that it was the right decision. For a long time I was trusting that if God had led me to it, then God would see me through it. But it was terrifying and difficult. And if it had been easy, then I would not have had to rely on trusting that God would be with me. I found comfort at times where I least expected it. From the lines of a familiar hymn – *But we never can prove the delights of his love, until all on the altar we lay; for the favor he shows, for the joy he bestows, are for them who will trust and obey.*

It requires surrendering yourself, but trusting in God as Abraham did allows us the opportunity to experience God's love for us.

Our lesson today concludes with Abraham's trust being spot on, for as he raises the knife to cut the throat of his beloved Isaac, the angel of God cries out "Abraham, Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him..." A ram, caught in a thicket close by, was brought and sacrificed and Abraham's words to Isaac earlier became prophetic – "The Lord will provide a lamb for the burnt offering." The message for us is simple – God will provide. But what, we might ask, will God provide? Something of an answer occurs to me in looking at my own experience in relocating back here. I was looking to God for comfort, reassurance, strength, anything to help me make it through. And my searching took on the form of prayer. I found myself wondering, as I read and re-read the passage in Genesis for today, if perhaps Abraham began praying to God as he set out on his journey to Mt. Moriah. I tried to imagine what his conversation with God might have been. And what about us? When we find ourselves in situations where we feel our faith being challenged, facing adversity, even death, does our prayer life not take on added significance? What are we looking for God to provide us? In one of his works entitled *Confessions* Augustine wrote about the

grace of God acting in his life, often in a prevenient if not providential way. He references there a story about his mother, Monica. Augustine grew up on the coast of North Africa – his mother, Monica was a devout Christian while his father was an utter pagan. Augustine represented, in his personality, a combination of these two strains coming together. But Augustine had not come to know Christ, and so his mother Monica prayed and prayed fervently that her beloved Augustine might be converted. A student of rhetoric, Augustine decided to go to Italy to further his studies. This was the last place that his mother thought he should go, for Italy was such a wild place – if he went there he might never develop a faith. And so while Augustine was boarding a ship to set sail to Italy, his mother Monica was in a chapel praying that God not allow her beloved Augustine to make this journey. Once in Italy, Augustine made his way to Milan and there came under the influence of Bishop Ambrose. Not drawn to Ambrose, also a man of rhetoric, by the content of what he had to say but rather by his style, Augustine over time began to listen to what this bishop had to say and in the process of that came to know Christ. The very thing that Monica had prayed God would not let happen became ultimately, the answer to her prayers and those prayers were answered. God had heard the substance of her prayers and answered them rather than the form of what it was for which she had been praying. This is, I think, one of the ways that God provides for us. God hears our prayers as we find our faith being tested and moves to answer the substance of our prayer, giving us what we *need* in that hour, not necessarily what we *want*.

Will we be tested as we journey through life – yes. Will we be challenged to trust God – yes. And will God meet us at our point of need and provide – absolutely. It may be strange and difficult to accept, but we are not called to be successful in our Christian walk, just faithful. And if we can follow the example of Abraham, to be

obedient in our faith, trusting in the love of God, then we can rest assured that God will indeed provide.

In the Name of the Father,

And the Son,

And the Holy Spirit.

Amen.