

“The LORD will provide”

Genesis 22:1-14 (July 2, 2023)

Faith is a mysterious thing. It draws on a relationship with God that can be exciting *and*, at times, perilous. It’s a journey that draws us forward, not always knowing what the outcome will be. Faith is always an invitation to put our lives in the hands of the living God.



In today’s scripture reading we continue with the story of Abraham. Two weeks ago, we heard a promise that Abraham and Sarah would be blessed with the miraculous birth of a child. Last week we saw that promise come true. But in today’s reading the promise is challenged by a difficult test.

Now I know it’s a holiday weekend. And we’re all feeling relaxed. It’s warm in here. And maybe you’re thinking it’s not a great day to be tested.

What can I say? It’s the lectionary reading. And more than that, it’s a really great story. Even if it is a difficult one.

It’s a story that has stuck with me, ever since I first heard it in Sunday School. And it continues to invite our reflection. What does this puzzling story mean? What implications does it have for our walk of faith, and our relationship with God?

Will God have something to show us today? Let’s pray that it will be so. Will you bow with me?

“Dear God, may we find in these words of scripture, nourishment for our journey, and an invitation to walk with you in faith. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.”



As you know, Abraham and Sarah had a child in their old age. When they were just about ready to give up on the promise of God, God came through for them.

Isaac, the child of laughter, was their delight. The apple of their eye.

He embodied their hope for the future. Isaac was the one through whom God’s covenant would be fulfilled: offspring as numerous as the sand and the stars. And great blessing, not only for Abraham’s family but for all the families of the earth.

It’s a wonderful promise. But as the story unfolds, God decides to do something quite unsettling, and put Abraham to the test.



“Abraham!” God says. “Here I am,” he answers.

“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.”



Tel Be'er Sheva, Reconstruction of an ancient Israelite horned altar (based upon the remnants of the original one) as it was used to sacrifice animals. The original altar was probably dismantled during the time of Hezekiah, the King of Judah, with the centralization of the Israelite cult in the temple of Jerusalem. Author: Daniel Baránek, license: CC BY-SA 4.0, source: Wikimedia Commons

Holy smoke! What a terrifying request! What is Abraham supposed to do with that?

God has given this precious child. Will God now take that child away?

Abraham gets up early the next day, saddles his donkey, and sets out to fulfil God's request.

And I don't know about you, but that sends a frightening shiver down my spine.



Abraham seems so willing to comply. Is he to be commended for it?

Tell me, what would you do?

Say, you get this word from the LORD. And it's the strangest, most unexpected, most challenging thing you've ever heard. "Take your child, your beloved child, and offer him, or her, on the altar."

"I beg your pardon, LORD? Did I hear you correctly?"

Now this request sounds absolutely *crazy* to us. But way back in the ancient world, human sacrifice was a thing which some of Israel's neighbours practiced.



Circular altar-like shrine at Megiddo,
photo by Hanay,
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:Tell_Megiddo_-_4.2006_-36.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tell_Megiddo_-_4.2006_-36.JPG)

I remember visiting an archaeological site at Megiddo, featuring a large circular altar, dating from just before Abraham's time. It's thought the Canaanites used this altar for sacrifice, including the sacrifice of children.

And before you start the pointing the finger at those Baal-worshipping Canaanites, you should know that some of Israel's kings, Ahaz and Manasseh to be specific, did the same.¹

So sacrificing a child is not out of the question.



Abraham may not know everything there is to know about God. But still, if I was Abraham, I'd be giving my head a *shake*.

Could the Creator, the giver of all *life*, be commanding death? Could the Covenant-maker, the God who recruited Abraham for the purpose of blessing the world, now be rescinding that blessing? Does any of this make sense?

If it was me, I'd be putting the brakes on. I'd want to be very sure it was the voice of God I was listening to, and not something else.

I'd search the scriptures. I'd call a meeting of the Deacons. I'd check it out with my wife. I'd pray about it. And then I'd pray some more.

¹ Cassie Waits, "Extreme Faith," <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/64906bd46615fb946c000018/cassie-waits-extreme-faith>, Accessed June 28, 2023

I'd be like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, searching for some other way. "Lord, if it be possible, remove this cup from me!"

Don't you know that blind, unquestioning loyalty can get us into trouble? Terrorists have blind, unquestioning loyalty to their cause.

I told you this was a difficult passage of scripture. It's what some have referred to as a "text of terror." Because, at first glance, it seems to promote a frightening objective, and to portray God in a most disturbing way.



But let's continue. The heat of the day hasn't made you sleepy, has it? Things are about to get really interesting now.

Abraham saddles his donkey and sets off with two young men, together with his son. When they get near the place of sacrifice, he says, "You two wait here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on to worship. When we've finished we'll come back."

It sounds like Abraham plans to return and Isaac with him. But how can that be? If Abraham goes through with this sacrifice, there will be no Isaac.

Now listen again, as they walk on together, father and son. Isaac senses something is not quite right.

"Father!" says Isaac. "Here I am," says Abraham, the same response he gave to God.

"The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" That's such a poignant question. Because we know who the lamb may be.

Abraham answers, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Abraham seems very confident of these things, doesn't he? "We will return," he tells the two who are waiting. "The Lord will provide," he assures his son.

Maybe, at this point in his journey with God, Abraham has learned a lesson: God *does* provide. God provided a son, when Abraham and Sarah had lost all hope. Now, Abraham trusts that God will provide for him again.



You know, I have to wonder: I know that God is testing Abraham. Could it be that Abraham is also testing *God*? Imagine that!

In any real relationship, it doesn't all go one way. Relationships are a two-way street.

"I'll do my part, Lord. Will you do yours? Will you keep the covenant you have made? Will you preserve the life of this child that you have given us? Will you be true to your promise?"

What do you think? How will it go?



Jesus suffers agony in the garden of Gethsemane by Gustave Doré (1832–1883)

There's a hymn we sing – we'll use it later this morning. One of the verses goes like this:
“But we never can prove the delights of [God's] love,
until all on the altar we lay.”

All of it. Even that which is most dear and precious to us.

“For the favour [God] shows, and the joy [God] bestows, are for them who will trust and obey.
Trust and obey, for there's no other way ...”²

Can we *trust* God? That is one of the questions this story tries to address. Is the God of Abraham cruel and arbitrary? Or is God a God of love, a God of life?

Maybe you have asked that very question. Especially at a time of impending loss. A time when you are invited to risk everything for the sake of Jesus. Is God to be trusted in this? Will God's promise be kept? Will everything be OK?



Abraham and Isaac arrive at the place of sacrifice. He builds the altar. He lays the wood in order. One by one, he follows the directions God has given.

Now he takes his son. He binds him so he cannot move. He lays Isaac on the altar, on top of the wood.



Gerhardt Wilhelm von Reutern, 1794-1865. Sacrifice of Isaac, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.
<https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54819> [retrieved June 27, 2023]. Original source: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ReuternAbraham.jpg>.

We can hardly bear to look on. The tension in this story is too much for us. Something has to give.

Abraham reaches out his hand.

“Now LORD,” we cry. “Now would be the time! Can't you do something?”

Can you imagine the heart-pounding, wild-eyed terror that must be pulsing through Abraham's body? And that of Isaac even more!

“He took the knife to kill his son.”



“Abraham, Abraham.” Twice the call if given. There is an urgency in the angel's voice.

“Here I am.”

“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” the angel says, “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.”

² “When we walk with the Lord,” text by John H. Sammis, *Hymns Old and New*, 1887.

“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.”

And so the tension eases. The life of Isaac is spared. Though I have to wonder if this episode has not scarred him. How can you live through something like that and not be irrevocably changed?



What does the story mean for *us*, this heart-wrenching narrative?

God does not desire human sacrifice. In the ancient world, that was revolutionary. God gives life and love.

How much do *we* value our children’s lives? And not just our own, but all those little ones entrusted to our care?



And perhaps the deeper learning for people who seek to live in relationship with God, is that God is faithful. We can put our lives, and all that is precious to us, on the altar, offering them up to God every single day, and it will be OK.



Sometimes we have no choice in this. When we are sick. When our loved ones are in trouble. When our children and grandchildren move on to establish lives of their own. What can we do but entrust them to God’s hands?

We’re told that Abraham named that place “Jehovah Jireh,” “the Lord will provide.”

God will always give us what we need. Not always what we want – that’s for sure. But what we need.

Life isn’t always easy. And our relationship with God can be fraught with many challenges, choices, and difficult decisions. But when put to the test, we discover that God is good. God will keep’s God’s promises!

We live in a world that is sometimes frightening. But we have this confidence: that the love of God in Jesus Christ will never let us go!

Thanks be to God.