

Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 13
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

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Put To The Test

I suppose I'll just start with the obvious. I could preach on the Gospel today. Or even Romans. As a matter of fact, we didn't have to read that passage from Genesis, we could have read from Jeremiah this morning. Granted, Jeremiah was prophesying about famine and pestilence and war, but that seems so much better than this profoundly difficult, even horrifying story of God commanding a father to kill his son. But it doesn't seem right to hear this story of Abraham and Isaac, and just leave it hanging there, or worse yet, pretend it wasn't a part of God's story, a part of our story, pretend there isn't something important for us in this story. I find that when the scriptures are difficult, they're asking me to wrestle with them. And wrestling is a really good way to be in relationship with God. If we turn away from this story, we'll miss what it has for us. And worse yet, we might want to turn away from God.

I remember hearing this passage one Sunday morning long before I was a priest. The lay reader was a man, a father who had a beloved little son. As he began to read, his voice softened and began to crack. Tears rolled down his cheeks as this beautiful, faithful father read of a God who was asking a father to kill his beloved son. What kind of a God would do that? So, let's engage that question. Let's open our minds and our hearts and see what this story has for us.

One of the many things that fascinates me about this passage is the utter lack of emotion expressed in the midst of one of the most emotional stories in the bible! I am full of feelings when I hear this story and the seeming absence of feelings in Abraham or Isaac makes this story all the stranger. No feelings, only facts:

- God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his son.
- Abraham gets up early the next morning to make preparations and then to go to the appointed place.
- They arrive at the appointed place and Abraham instructs the slaves to stay put while he and the boy worship.
- Abraham builds the altar.
- He binds Isaac.
- He raises the knife to kill Isaac.
- He is instructed not to kill Isaac.
- He doesn't kill Isaac.
- He sees a ram.
- He kills the ram and makes it the sacrifice.

That's one way to read it. And horrifying as it is, that might actually be the easiest way to read it. When we read it that way, the story is cold and stark and emotionless. When we read it that way, we can remain distant and maybe even keep the tears from rolling down our cheeks. But if we're willing to look a little more closely, we see glimpses of courage, concern, and tenderness. Glimpses of real humanity and deep love. And it is very, very important to recognize those things. Of course, recognizing those things makes the story more real, more human, and harder to look at. When we catch those glimpses of humanity, we can no longer pretend that Abraham is God's robot, unaffected by what is being asked of him. Just last week, Sarah demanded that Abraham send his other son away and now Isaac, the precious and beloved son who was the miracle from God, the one who by rights never even should have been born, Isaac - the promise through whom God's story would go on forever, is about to be taken away too? All this makes it harder, not easier to understand how Abraham could have contemplated sacrificing this particular life, the life that was his future, and God's future too. And what's even more difficult than that, is to imagine that God, our God, the One God, the God whose name is Love, would have asked him to do it.

God tested Abraham. I do not like these words. I can do something reasonable and theologically sound and even work the faithfulness and loving heart of a generous God into all the rest of the story. But those words *God tested Abraham?* Those words confound me because they seem to portray a God who is cruel. A God who would torture his admittedly human but very faithful servant, Abraham. We don't even need to be parents to imagine how tortuous that would have been. Why would God put Abraham to the test? This test? What does this say about God's character? What kind of God would make this demand? And if God asked this of Abraham, what might God ask of me? Of you? Of us?

It's important to remember that context matters and that this is the story of God's chosen people Israel, people who had been tested by flood and famine, and so much more. People who had sometimes forsaken God and who sometimes thought God had forsaken them. Even in the midst of all of God's promises, their lives had been fraught with profound trials and tribulations. For the Israelites, there had been many, many tests of their faith and of God's faithfulness. So think about the lives this story was made of and the lives this story was spoken in to, and know that they are not our lives today. This is a story of people living in a world where human sacrifice was a regular part of life. It doesn't take the sting out of it, but it does help us to see what God is doing. Seen this way, we might even hear God saying *"This is the end of it. No more human sacrifice."* I imagine that is really an important aspect of all of this... God knew exactly what God was asking, in asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. As it turned out, it was God who sacrificed God's Son, God's only Son, the Son whom God loved...

Abraham knew about sacrifice – he'd done a lot of sacrificing in order to be faithful to God. He gave up his home, the life he had known, and most everything precious to him because God told him to get up and go to a new place. And when he was given Isaac, he was willing to give him up too. Abraham knew that in Isaac, God had already made life out of barrenness – in Isaac, God had made life out of death. It's what God did as Jesus, too.

Isaac's life was a miracle from God, given by God as pure gift. Isaac belonged to God and Abraham knew that. So when God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, not only did God see the depth of Abraham's faithfulness. Abraham saw the depth of God's faithfulness, too. And while all that's true, I can't imagine any interpretation of this story that could ever wrap it up, clean it up, or make it somehow perfectly agreeable to us. This is a most mysterious story. It brings up questions that can't be precisely or easily answered. I think that's because it's a story about trust, and faith, and the mystery that is God. That's the rub, isn't it? When we can't explain something of God, we really only have a couple of choices... we can trust God, or we can discount God.

God tested Abraham. Perhaps Abraham tested God too, this God who had promised country and covenant, identity and a future. *"Look toward heaven"* God had said to him. *"Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... so shall your descendants be."*¹ Would the God who had demanded so much from Abraham, the God Abraham had served so faithfully – not perfectly, but faithfully – would this God give Isaac as the promise of God's future and the future of all Israel, and then take it all away? Maybe Abraham needed to know. Maybe Abraham needed to test God.

God tested Abraham. Those words really do show us the seriousness, the gravity, the essential trusting nature of a life of faith. Whether or not the notion that "God tests" is our own experience, it was the experience of God's people, Israel. They were mightily tested over and over again. For them, everything – test or otherwise - was of God. For Abraham and his people, to say "God tested" was to say that God was still engaged with them, that their faithful response mattered to God, that their trust was of paramount importance to their future because remaining faithful meant remaining in relationship with the God who would always provide. Israel would have been lost without God's provision – whether it was the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven or water from a stone.

My experience is not of a God who tests us, and yet I have felt sorely tested in my life. There have been times when I felt so frightened, broken or bereft that I couldn't imagine any possibility of finding my way through. Most of us who have walked around in the world for any significant period of time have felt sorely tested. But my experience is not that God is the tester. My experience is of a God who comes alongside us in everything we encounter, every single time we feel put to the test. It's what happened with Abraham too... we just need not to be too quick to layer our own interpretations on the life of a faithful man who lived in a way we will never understand, in a culture we will never understand, in a time thousands of years ago.

Abraham did what God commanded, and God did what God promised. And having tested each other's faithfulness over and over again, they deepened their relationship. This faithfulness

¹ Genesis 15:5-6

wasn't blind obedience, it was the conscious and active decision to trust God, even in the face of not understanding. We've done this too – deciding to trust God when we don't understand what is happening in our partnerships, our families, our work lives, our country. This is a story about consciously and actively deciding to trust God, even in the face of not understanding. There are always tests. And God is always faithful. This is a story about what happens when we offer all that is dear to us, all that is painful to us, all that has hurt us, everything we don't understand - when we offer all that we are and all that we have back to the God who has given us everything. What happens is that God gives again and again and again. It's a promise. Amen.