

Call Me Abraham
Genesis 22:1-19
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
May 7, 2006
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If all we had in the story of Abraham was Genesis 12-20, that would be a good story. It would be the story of a promise – a story about a God who enters human history and calls out his own people and says, “Watch this...I’m going to do something amazing...” And if all we had in the story was the call of Abraham, we’d be here looking for ways that God’s promises show up in our lives.

And if the story of Abraham ended after chapter 21 and after the birth of Isaac, that would be enough. We’d know then about the God who keeps his promises. We’d have the story of a beginning. We’d know more about the origins of faith and the ways in which we are connected to the promise.

But that’s not where it ends, is it? Today we have one of the hardest passages of scripture to read, if we’re really paying attention. What does chapter 22 add to our understanding of God’s call to us through the story of Abraham? I’m here to suggest that today’s reading teaches us about the seriousness of faith, and about a God who requires undivided loyalty.

I want you to picture the scene. Abraham and Isaac are growing into the promise just fine, thank you very much. The boy is growing older and stronger, and then God shows up.

“Abraham”.

“Yes, Lord, I’m here.”

“Take your son. Your only son. Isaac. The son whom you love.”

“ALL RIGHT, GOD! I KNOW WHO YOU MEAN...JUST DON’T TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT...”

“I want you to kill him in order to please me.”

Arghhh! Don’t you hate that? Even Abraham knew that God couldn’t mean what he said. The pagans, they killed their children. But not us. Our God doesn’t want that. Our God gives, he doesn’t take. We don’t like this story. Not one bit, we don’t.

As we consider this passage this morning, I don’t want to talk about what most of us would say is our main objection to these verses. Many of us would say that while much of the Bible makes sense to us, the notion of a God who asks us to sacrifice our children is simply unacceptable. And I would say that we are being less than honest with ourselves if we say that we can’t talk about a God who demands that kind of sacrifice. The reality is this, my friends: every generation sacrifices its children to that which it deems most important. Oh, it’s usually not as bloody as the scene we are anticipating with Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah, but we sacrifice them – gladly, at times.

What happened in the 1940’s? The Axis powers threatened to overrun the globe. What did we do? We sent our children. We sacrificed our children in order to stop Hitler, Hirohito, and the rest. Fifty million citizens of the Allied powers died in that conflict, and twelve million from the Axis powers. Why did we do it? Because we had to. There was no choice. We took the brightest and best of our nation’s and the rest of the world’s youth and said we love you, but we love freedom more. Go, and God bless you. In the 1950’s we were scared to death about what might happen when the Russians took over, and we saw the way around that to be through education – especially math and science.

So our entire nation re-formed itself around the compulsory education of every child age 5 – 18. I'm not saying it worked entirely as planned, but the intent was there – we were giving our children to education so that they could save us in the end. The current national debt of the USA is \$8.4 trillion. We love you, kids, but we love some of our other choices more. Good luck with paying that off...

So I don't want to talk about how we can't worship a God who expects our children, because the truth is that we gladly hand our children over to the things that are important to us. So I guess you can call me Abraham, because I'm here sacrificing my daughter to the things that I think are most important eternally.

The other thing that I don't want to talk about this morning is how this is a passage that proves Abraham as a model of faithful behavior. Look, if we haven't gotten the message that Abraham is a "go-to guy" in the faith department now, after leaving his homeland and journeying to a strange place; after claiming the land; after struggling with God, with Sarah, with Hagar, with Lot, with Ishmael; after 25 years of waiting for the promise to be true – then we are not going to get the message. This passage is not in the book to tell us that Abraham was a champion believer. We know that. And, on my good days, maybe you could call me Abraham, because I hope that when God calls my name, I can say, "Here I am, Lord."

This is what I do want to talk about this morning: I want to talk about how our understanding of God is shaped by what happens in this story. Look at the first verse. What does God do? "God tested Abraham." God is a tester. And look at verse 14. What does God do? "God provided". God is a provider. God tests and God provides.

We don't like that, most of us. Many of us see the Lord only as a provider –a generous, loving, embracing Father who gives us what we need. Some of us (mostly folks who aren't here, to be honest) have a more hardened view of God, wherein God is a callous control freak who takes great delight in yanking our chains from time to time. But God, in this incredibly rich and profound passage, is both a tester and a provider.

What does it mean to say that God tests us? The clear meaning of Genesis 22 is that there are times and places wherein God wants to know, "Do you believe me? Do you really believe me? You know, it might be easier if you believed something, or someone else." The story of Job is an example of another time when God fairly obviously tested someone's faith.

Now, wait a minute, pastor! Are you suggesting that when things go wrong in my life, that God is testing me? When my beloved dies, when I lose my job, when my eyesight fails – is that God's doing? Are you saying that God is intentionally doing something in order to test my faith?

That's a hard question. Sometimes we try to avoid it by saying, "You know, most of those descriptions of God's testing...they're in the Old Testament. It's different now." Uh-huh. But every week you join me and pray out loud, "Lead us not into temptation." Or, "lead us not into a time of testing."¹ We affirm that in the prayer that Jesus gave us, God has something to do with times of trial and testing.

And we know, that, of course. Nobody wants to sit here and say that God made your beloved die, God took your job, or God struck you blind. But because we believe in the fact that God is all-powerful, I can't stand here and say that God was a helpless bystander when those things were going on. God is clearly able to save the beloved, keep the job, and preserve the eyesight. Yet for his own reasons, there are times when he allows those things to be ripped from us. And those are times of

¹ I am particularly indebted to Walter Brueggemann for his treatment of the Lord's Prayer and this passage (*Genesis Interpretation Commentary*, 1982, John Knox).

testing. So God is a tester. You can call me Abraham, for I have seen this testing God in the world. I have wrestled with him. As Walter Brueggemann says in his commentary on this passage, “The testing times...are those times when it is seductively attractive to find an easier, less-demanding alternative to God. The testings which come in history...drive us to find out whether we mean what we say about our faith being grounded solely in the gospel.”² God is a tester -- and that scares me to death.

But we have to finish this chapter to get to the rest of the affirmation. God not only shows up as a tester in Abraham’s life, but God provides. The usual transliteration of the Hebrew is *Jehovah Jireh*. Literally, that means, that “God will see to it.” Isaac asks his father, “What about the Lamb?” and dad replies, “God will see to it.”

You know something about depending on God to provide. You’ve seen it time and time again in scripture: when the Israelites get the manna every day...when Jesus feeds the crowds with bread...when Peter escapes from prison. God provides. And you also know it from the same place where you affirm God’s testing: for not only do you ask for relief from testing, but you pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” God, see to it for us. Call me Abraham, because I have seen God provide in incredible and miraculous ways.

So what are we to do with this passage? How does it apply in our lives? I hope that you believe me when I tell you this is not a passage about a God who is out for blood, or a story about a God who cruelly taunts his child only to provide a way out at the last minute. God does not allow Abraham to draw Isaac’s blood, and if you’ve been around church very long you know that’s because God himself will make the perfect sacrifice for our sin. It’s God’s son, not Abraham’s who is going to die.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that you love and serve a God who will test and provide? When you walk out of these doors this morning, you will be sorely tested. Idols will line up and down the street, begging you to worship them. Tempting you to worship them. You will be implored to worship the god of ease, the god of self, the god of power, the god of satisfaction...and that’s before you hit the sidewalk on Stratmore St. You will be tested. But God is faithful and will provide.

Paul was writing to his friends in Corinth about the power of idols to lure us away from faithful worship of God, and he said this: “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to all humanity. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the temptation God will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it.” (I Corinthians 10:13).

God tests, and God provides. That can only make sense in one foundational way: if God is good. If God is faithful. If God can be trusted. To quote Brueggemann again, “In the end, our narrative is perhaps not about Abraham being found faithful. It is about God being found faithful.”³

We don’t know – we can’t know – what’s ahead of us. We can’t know how we will survive the various testings that will come our way today and tomorrow and the next day. But we can affirm and rely on the fact that God has proven himself to be a provider. God has demonstrated time and time again that his intentions for his creation are good. We bring babies up front this morning and confirm in them and remind the rest of us the truth that we serve a God who can be trusted.

Call me Abraham, because I’ve seen it. And I know you have, too. May God give us grace to recognize it in the days to come. Amen.

² Brueggemann, p. 190

³ Brueggemann p. 194.