

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
March 1, 2015  
Second Sunday in Lent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 22:1-14  
Psalm 16:5-11  
Romans 8:31-39  
Mark 8:31-38

Our Old Testament lesson today (the story of God's testing of Abraham) is the concluding chapter in what has been a lengthy journey for Abraham, both physically and spiritually.

Many years before this, God appeared to Abraham and promised to make him the father of many nations, to bless the world through his offspring. In view of that promise, God called Abraham to leave his home and his country, and to launch out in faith toward a place where God would lead him.

This is precisely what Abraham did. In the Book of Hebrews, the writer says this about Abraham:

*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.*

But as the years pass, there are numerous times where Abraham's faith is less than stellar. For example, he lies under pressure and tells the Egyptians and Abimelech that Sarah is his *sister* and not his wife. On another occasion, he sleeps with Hagar the Egyptian servant woman when he doesn't see evidence of God working things out to bring his promised son.

But finally, after many years, Isaac is born. Abraham literally holds God's promise to him in his arms. He settles in the land of Beersheba, and one would think that his physical and spiritual journey is pretty much over.

But alas, not so. More than 25 years after calling Abraham the first time, God comes to him again. He asks him to take his only son, the very promise of God, to Mt. Moriah, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering.

Now at this point questions flood our minds, questions which actually hinder us from hearing the story on its own terms, but they are so compelling we must address them.

We ask: Would God really ask for a human sacrifice? Is this consistent with the God revealed to us in the Scriptures?

We also ask: Why would God deal patiently with Abraham for so many years, leading him to accept God's promise, and then take the promise back once it was finally in Abraham's hands?

These are significant questions indeed. *But they are not on the lips of Abraham, and they are not the heart of this story.* This story may challenge our settled notions of God, and some of our questions may go unanswered. *But the central issue in this story is not the character of God but the testing of Abraham.*

**The story is presented to us as a test of Abraham.** The story proceeds on the

premise that Abraham is being tested, and that God *really* is calling him to offer Isaac up.

So back to the story.

Abraham saddles the donkeys, grabs Isaac and some servants, and heads off for another distant place. Abraham probably thought to himself: “I spent the last 25 years traveling to an unknown place and to a future I don’t understand. All I could do was trust God to show me the way and how to get there. If I did it once, I can do it again.”

As Abraham and Isaac approach Mt. Moriah, Isaac asks, “Father, we have wood and fire, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham replies, “God will provide a lamb, my son.”

This is an important moment. The Hebrew word for “provide” is the word which means “to see.” Abraham answers his son by saying, “God will see it (the lamb), my son.”

This notion of “seeing” is key to the story. In saying that God will “see” the lamb, Abraham affirms that God will see what is needed *before* Abraham sees it, and that God sees what Abraham does not see.

What Abraham affirms to Isaac is not merely a belief that God would provide a substitute offering to replace Isaac. That is not the focus of the story.

The real test for Abraham is not whether he had the faith to believe God would spare his son. **The real test is whether Abraham could trust God enough to give up the promise and start again from the same place he had started more than 25 years earlier.**

The test was whether Abraham's faith had grown to the point where he could trust *God*, not just what he could see and hold in his hands.

Here is what confronted Abraham: *When God led him in ways that seemed threatening and even contrary to what Abraham thought he should do, was he willing to trust this God who did not always do what he expected, who did not act like he thought he should, and who did not always fit into his settled categories?*

No matter how absurd the path appeared, was Abraham willing to trust that God "saw" what he could not see?

And here is where we enter the story. We are very much like Abraham. We want God's will in our lives, but we want it on *our* terms, according to things we can see and control. We want a predictable God, one who would never call us into uncertainty, and who would certainly never ask us to give up something that we cherish.

We want a safe God in a safe world that we can manage. We want a God who will fit within the confines of our finite thinking, where we can construct the biggest theological words we can find to draw those boundaries for him. In our

honest moments, we want a God who is domesticated and controllable by our creeds and affirmations.

But the God of Abraham is not that kind of God. One middle aged man, after hearing this story in church one Sunday morning, went to his pastor after the service. He said: “Pastor, my family and I will be looking for another church after this morning.”

“May I ask why?” his pastor answered.

“Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I’m near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham’s God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more.”

Silence gripped the room. And then the man said: “I want to know *that* God.”

But there is another dimension to God I want you to notice from this story. God places incredible trust in Abraham here. If this truly is a test of Abraham (and not a charade), then much depends on Abraham in this case. God called him to make this journey, but finally it is *he* who must make it.

God has placed Abraham under the promise. But Abraham can reject it. There is no sense here that God has compelled or forced Abraham to accept the

promise. In fact, *the whole story depends upon the possibility of Abraham failing and rejecting the promise*, otherwise it makes very little sense.

This story portrays genuine covenant relationship between God and Abraham. God chose Abraham, and then called on Abraham to choose God. But Abraham is free to reject what God has called him to do and be. In this sense, I wonder then if the story is as much a test of *God* as it is of Abraham.

Once again, we enter the story. God calls each of us to covenant relationship with him. It is a journey of faith, a journey into the unknown. It may take you into circumstances you cannot control. God may ask the impossible of you, and work on His timetable and not yours. The journey may take you into unspeakable tragedy. You may suffer incalculable loss.

And at some point on your journey, you may be tested, as Abraham was. That testing will be an opportunity for you to ask yourself an important question: Will you live your life with faith that *God* sees what you cannot?

As you contemplate your answer, let me remind you of another time and place. The sky darkens, the wind howls, and a young man walks up another Mt. Moriah, driven there by a God who demands everything and stops at nothing. He carries a cross on his back rather than sticks for fire, but like Abraham he presses on, believing that *God sees what he cannot*, no matter what the cost.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.