

The Test
Genesis 22:1-14
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
June 26, 2011

To say the least, the story of the binding or sacrifice of Isaac is not one of the lessons we teach our children in our workshop rotation curriculum, nor do we preach about this passage very often. Aside from being just plain scary, this passage is difficult, complicated and leaves me feeling just a little concerned about what kind of God I may be worshipping. This chapter does not sit well with me at all. And I suspect many of you wonder about a God who puts Abraham to what we might call the ultimate test.

Consider the setting. God has promised Abraham and Sarah that they will be the father and mother of a great nation. Yet when they are very old, they still do not have any children. Finally, God grants Sarah a child, Isaac, and things seem to be moving right along. They have their son, they have a secure position in the country, and time passes. Yahweh has been proven to be faithful to them. But, then in Chapter 22, there come these chilling words, “After these things, God tested Abraham.”

And what a test. God has commanded Abraham to take his beloved son and sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. So Abraham takes Isaac and a couple of servants and heads out. In a nutshell, they arrive at the appointed place, the servants are left behind, and Abraham all but kills his son when God intervenes sparing Isaac and instead substituting a ram for the burnt offering.

I’m not sure which is the most appalling aspect of this story, that God would ask anyone to do such a thing, or that anyone would find this request to be reasonable! What in the world does this say about the nature of God, and about what this God requires of those of us who claim to be God’s followers.

As you might imagine, commentators over the years have picked this passage apart trying to make it more palatable. But friends, there is no way to make this passage easy for us. Sometimes we need to be look at these very difficult passages and be confronted with Biblical truths that make us uncomfortable. Such confrontations stretch our faith, our understandings and our commitment to our Lord. So let’s let this narrative challenge us this morning. I know it has challenged me this last week!

There are at least three points that need to be made about the sacrifice of Isaac and how we might think about the truths contained in this disquieting story.

First, we might be tempted to dismiss the tale as “just an old testament” tale of terror. Often when we talk about the Old Testament, we do so in a way that holds the New Testament in higher regard. To contrast an Old Testament God of wrath with a New Testament God of love is simply put, false. The God of Israel was and is the same God that Jesus worshipped, and both testaments contain the tension between divine wrath and

divine love.¹ If your picture of God is tender and merciful, check out the Revelation of John at the end of the New Testament. If your picture of God is wrathful and unyielding, check out most of the Psalms or even the account of the Exodus. No, we need to leave behind this notion that God is differently revealed in the two testaments.

Secondly, many commentators believe that this particular passage was a rejection of child sacrifice, which was apparently practiced at some points in Israelite history (Jdg. 11:29-40; Jer. 19:5-6; Mic. 6:7). Every first-born whether human or animal, was to be set apart for the LORD (Exod. 13:1-2; cf., Exod. 22:29). The replacement of Isaac with a ram in Genesis 22 corresponds with a provision for the redemption of first-born sons, apparently with the sacrifice of a sheep.

The repeated call of Abraham's name, "Abraham, Abraham!" when the father raises his knife indicates the urgency of this divine command. It is not God's intention that Isaac, the child of laughter and of delight for two elderly parents, should be killed or harmed in any way.² So some point to this story as the beginning of an understanding that children should not be sacrificed.

And third, there are those who believe that this account was written in the exilic period when Israel was wrestling with how their God could have let them be exiled to Babylon. We talked about that last week. This literature was written in order to teach lessons to the Israelites about what all their suffering meant.

So in this analysis, Isaac is a metaphor for the country of Israel, and Abraham is a stand-in for God. And the moral of the story, the meaning in the message, is that God will not allow Israel to be sacrificed in the plains of Babylon. God will provide for the tribes and will ultimately get them home and back where they belong.

OK, we might say. There are ways to understand what's going on here, but it remains quite disturbing. Do we in fact worship a God who tests us in this way? Our 21st century minds reel thinking about the psychological harm done to the child whose father goes to the edge of murdering him. What does it do to the child's relationship with his father, and what does it do to the child's relationship with God? And why would anyone tell such a story? And why is it in the canon?

These are indeed reasonable questions but I would caution us because we are bringing our 21st century minds to the story, not focusing on what the author of the story intended. This story focuses on Abraham. It is little concerned with the child. It is completely unconcerned with the child's mother. This story tells the tale of the relationship of Abraham and God. It is about testing Abraham and about Abraham's willingness to do what God says even when it is outrageous. Even when it concerns the fulfillment of God's own purpose. Even when it goes against Abraham's feelings as a father. We might well be reminded of Jesus's statement that it is impossible to be his disciple unless

¹ Tribble, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror*, p. 2.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/29/2008&tab=2

we hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters and even life itself. (Luke 14:26). This is difficult theology. These are difficult demands.

We learn here that this God we worship tests our faith in ways we will not like, in ways we cannot imagine. This notion of God is not easy for us who wish an alternative less demanding God. “Ohh” we say, “our God is love. Our God does not require us to do things we would rather not do.” But from the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, we learn that our God demands undivided loyalty, a difficult requirement of faith for a people focused on consumerism, patriotism, and civil religion. The testing time for “all of us who are heirs of Abraham are those times when it is seductively attractive to find an easier less demanding alternative to God.”³ This God we worship requires our total attention, and will suffer nothing less. How many of us pass this test?

But the story is also about a God who provides. While the narrative begins with God testing, the narrative ends with God providing. And this God who provides, is no less problematic than the God who tests. For as Abraham takes his child to the mountain, he asserts to Isaac, when questioned by the boy, that God will provide the lamb. Wow, now that is faith. To assert that God will provide in such a circumstance requires faith as intense as does the conviction that God tests. It affirms that God, only God and none other is the source of life. And if God is the source of life, this faith claims that God will work out all things to God’s purposes.⁴ So, when the ram appears in the bushes, Abraham can be certain that it did not appear there by chance or good fortune. Abraham knows beyond understanding that God will find a way to bring life even in this scenario of death. The ram was supplied by the God who provides. What began by God asserting God’s authority, ends with God asserting God’s graciousness.

I suspect that we are much more comfortable with the notion of the God who provides than we are with the God who tests. But this text makes clear that the god whom we worship is both. And Abraham clearly was not free of the testing and clearly was not competent for his own provision.

That God embodies these seeming contradictions flies in the face of what we may want to find reasonable in God. God does not conform to what we find logical or rational or even consistent. God tests to identify God’s people, to figure out who fully trusts God, and to know who will live fully in God’s love. God provides with gifts that are inexplicable and often unexpected. This narrative does not allow us to pick and choose which attributes we want to ascribe to God. God tests and God provides.⁵

In what ways is God testing and providing today?

There is probably a laundry list of ways we might consider God to be testing us today. Our world is faced with a heap of problems, many of our own doing, many with not such

³ Brueggeman, Walter. Genesis, p. 190

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid*, p. 193.

good solutions. We could dwell on these challenges getting nowhere. But I think making such a list may keep us from seeing the essential point of this story.

Consider what is most valuable to you today. Are you willing to let that go? Are you able to turn it over to God? Are you willing to have the faith it takes to believe that in that sacrifice God will find a way to turn even a scenario of death into the graciousness of life?

That is what faith in the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus demands of us. That we have faith that in the face of death, even death brought on by God, God will find a way to bring life. When we lay this narrative next to the passion narrative we see the parallels. Take your son, your only son, your beloved son...and offer him as a burnt offering. It is resurrection finally that leads us through this text. Because the God we worship surprises us with life at every turn. Our faith trusts in the power of life at every turn, just as Abraham trusted in God to provide. The appearance of the ram at the last minute proves that God gives in ways unintelligible to us, and we can with Abraham affirm that God will provide even in the midst of what appears to be only death.

Genesis 22 after all is said and done is a story of life coming into a situation of death; a story of redemption; a story of faith in the midst of extreme trauma. It is true that it sometimes is difficult to see God's provision and goodness in desperate situations when tragedy strikes. Nevertheless, the text calls upon us to look up and see God's goodness breaking into situations of despair. The true act of faith on the part of Abraham thus is not that of blind faith, but the true act of faith is the ability to recognize God's provision in the ordinary, especially in those circumstances when everything appears to be futile and falling apart.⁶

God tests. God provides. Thanks be to God.

⁶ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=6/26/2011&tab=2