

FIRST LESSON: Genesis 22:1-14
SECOND LESSON: James 2: 21-24
July 2, 2023

“The Terrible Test”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

There’s an absolutely dreadful joke about the passage we read this morning.

Abraham was struggling with his computer when Isaac wandered past. “Whatcha doing dad?” he asked.

“I’m trying to upgrade the software on my old laptop,” Abraham replied.

“It’ll never work,” said Isaac. “You don’t have enough memory on that thing.”

“Don’t worry, son,” Abraham replied. “God will provide the RAM.”

You may now groan.

This is not an easy story for us to deal with. A different generation did not find it as much of a struggle. A God who demands such total loyalty that the death of a son was commanded was not a problem for John Calvin or Martin Luther. It was not a problem for fire and brimstone 18th century American revivalist Jonathan Edwards. It was not a problem for the fundamentalists of the early 20th century. It may not even be a problem for the most theologically conservative today, although I suspect that culture has changed enough for them to be at least slightly uncomfortable. But we read this story with horror. And throughout time rabbinic scholars, always a bit more nuanced than fundamentalist Christians, have tried to come up with new perspectives and answers.

In this story we appear to have a God who demands human sacrifice, the sacrifice of a long promised and much-loved son. It’s a test, but Abraham doesn’t know that. And Abraham doesn’t argue with God, as he had a few chapters earlier when arguing over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and arranging to get Lot safely out. Abraham doesn’t seem to say anything! He certainly doesn’t tell Sarah what’s going on. We can only imagine what she would have done. He doesn’t tell the servants or Isaac. He simply gathers everything and everyone together and they set out for Mount Moriah.

We aren’t certain about the location of Mount Moriah, but Jewish tradition says that it is the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. According to 2 Chronicles 3:1, Solomon built the Temple on Mount Moriah. Solomon’s temple was destroyed, but the new temple was built on the same ground. A legend even developed that the location of the altar of burnt offering in the Temple was the exact location of the altar built by Abraham. Later Christian tradition changed the location, alleging for theological reasons that Abraham’s altar was

actually in Golgotha. Neither idea is particularly historical, although the Temple Mount in general is a good guess.

The distance to the mountain upon which Jerusalem was eventually built is consistent with the distance Abraham traveled. Abraham began his journey in Beersheba, about 45 miles southwest of Jerusalem. The journey would have taken several days. The terrain was easy to start, but very challenging when it came to climbing the mountain. The last part of the trek would have involved Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his back all the while engaged in a very difficult climb. Rabbis over the centuries have commented on this brutal fact. Quite independent of Christianity some even compared it to those condemned by the Romans being forced to carry their own cross.

Once they got to the mountain Abraham told the two servants to stay with the donkey while he and Isaac went up the mountain to worship. In fact, he expressly gave the impression they would both be returning, saying, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." He also didn't tell Isaac what was going on. Isaac asked, "The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

Abraham was not a young man. Isaac had the job of carrying the firewood, therefore Isaac was old enough to do that. We are not speaking of a little boy, but at least a strong teenager. Abraham built the altar, probably with Isaac's help, and then laid the wood. But then comes the truly remarkable part of the story. Abraham binds Isaac. But Isaac was stronger and far more agile than Abraham. He could have fought him and run. And if he thought his father had lost his mind and was doing something crazy, we assume he would have done so. The trust that Isaac had in his father must have been incredible. And I cannot begin to imagine what would have been going through Isaac's mind when he saw his father lift the knife poised to kill him.

At the very last minute an angel called Abraham twice. "Here I am," Abraham replied.

"Do not lay a hand on the boy," the angel said on behalf of God. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." And when Abraham looked up he saw a ram in the thicket caught by its horns. He went and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering. We are not told anything about unbinding Isaac. We don't know anything about the emotional state of either father or son at this point, only that Abraham called the place The Lord Will Provide.

Both Jews and Christians honor this story, giving it a central place in theology and worship. For Jews the very words used to describe this event changed with the fall of the Temple in 70 CE, however. Before the Temple was destroyed it was called the "offering" of Isaac. Afterwards it was called the "binding" of Isaac, or akedah in Hebrew. Isaac's binding came to be viewed as a vicarious atonement for all of Israel, taking the place of the temple sacrifices which were no long possible. The shofar, or ram's horn blown at Rosh Hashanah represents the horn of the ram that was substituted for Isaac.

Human sacrifice was not uncommon in the ancient world. Where this impulse comes from it is hard to say. It is something totally abhorrent to God and condemned in Scripture. The biblical law against it is repeated numerous times in the Hebrew Scriptures. (Lev 18:21, Lev 20:3, Deut 12:30-31, Deut 18:10) Where there is a law against something, there are people doing it. But Abraham didn't have scripture. Scripture came later. Abraham had a God who communicated with him, a God who promised great blessings in return for loyal obedience.

If this happened today, Abraham would have been involuntarily committed, and if deemed sane, charged with a crime and gone to prison. "God told me to do it," would not wash. And we are right to be very careful if we feel that God is telling us to do something that makes no sense. By God's own standards, Abraham was being asked to do something God disapproves of. Generally speaking, that's grounds right there for concluding that the source of the command is not divine! But this was a far more primitive time and this is a primitive story, raw and emerging from the depths of human history.

Christians have from the earliest days looked upon Isaac as a prefiguration of Christ. Both Jesus and Isaac were miraculously conceived. Isaac was the beloved son of his father, and he carried the wood for his own sacrifice, just as Jesus, the beloved son of his father, carried his own cross. The journey to Moriah took three days. Jesus spent three days in the tomb prior to his resurrection. But if Isaac's near sacrifice and Jesus' sacrificial death are identified, perhaps that does that mean that they do not need to be repeated. Jewish theologians look upon Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed that way.

As brutal as this story is it does tell us something about human commitment that applies to all of us, however. God will not ask us to sacrifice our child, but Jesus does say we should love God so much that all other loves take second place. And being committed to God means doing the right thing, even when we are up against it. The first thing people say when they back down from standing up in a dangerous situation is: "I have to think of my children." We have a current member of the congregation whose father lost his job as a pastor because of his involvement in the civil rights movement back in the sixties. Thinking of the children did not stop him from doing what he believed was right. A racist congregation kicked him out. The children survived.

Advocating on behalf of the marginalized by confronting homophobia, racism, sexism and ethnic intimidation is always costly. It feels especially daunting today in a society overflowing with guns. Hate spreads freely on the internet. When we defend those other people hate, we become a target of that hate too. But as long as we have an excuse, even if that excuse is something as noble and compelling as the welfare of our children, we will not be able to do God what wants us to do. And that for us is the challenge of Abraham and Isaac—to trust God when it is all on the line, **knowing** that God will provide. Amen.

Genesis 22:1-14

22 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”
“Here I am,” he replied.

2 Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. **4** On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. **5** He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, **7** Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

8 Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. **10** Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. **11** But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

12 “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram^[a] caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. **14** So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

James 2: 21-24

21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?**22** You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.**23** And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. **24** You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.