

Abraham and Isaac

^{NRS} **Genesis 22:1-14** After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."

⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill¹ his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide";¹ as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."²

Abraham and Isaac

This is one of the most terrifying texts in the Bible. This is Scripture we'd rather not talk about. This story disturbs us. Today, with all of the publicity that child abuse has received, we're especially upset by a story about child sacrifice. Killing one's own son and burning the body on a pile of wood is an image almost too horrible to bear. I have found though, that the scriptures that are the hardest to understand or that challenge me the most are the ones from which I can learn the most.

We've been talking these past few weeks about Abraham, and today we come to this text about the relationship between Abraham and Isaac and how Isaac, the promise of the future for Abraham, almost becomes the end of Abraham's future. As we've studied the stories about Abraham in Genesis we've seen high levels of faith and trust. When he was in Haran, God called him to pick up and leave - and Abraham did so with no reluctance or hesitation. In Genesis chapter 15, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be like the number of stars in the sky. Abraham trusted the Lord and the Lord recognized Abraham's high moral character. In Genesis chapter 17, God told Abraham that he and all of his descendants are to be circumcised. Beginning in verse 23, it says that Abraham took himself and his son Ishmael and every male in the household and they were circumcised. This is not something done lightly. For adult men, this was a painful show of trust and obedience to God.

On the other hand, we've also seen times when Abraham failed to trust God. On two occasions, when they were in a foreign land, we know that Abraham passed his wife off as his sister to protect his own neck. Abraham didn't trust God's promise that nothing would happen to them until they had a son. On separate occasions Abraham and Sarah each laughed at God's promise of a son because they didn't think it was possible for senior citizens such as themselves. They doubted so much that they took matters into their own hands and arranged for Abraham to have a son by a serving woman in the household. They didn't trust God's promise. So we can say that Abraham's record has been spotty. Sometimes he trusted God immensely and sometimes he seems to have little or no trust in God.

In those days, in the land of Canaan where Abraham lived, child sacrifice was common and had been practiced for centuries. A local god named Molech was the god that people would sacrifice firstborn children to.¹ The question may have arisen in Abraham's mind, if people who worship pagan deities could carry their religion to the extreme of sacrificing their own children, then how could Abraham show the worth of his religion and how it meant as much or more to him.

It's common for us to think that God knows what our decisions and actions will be in the future. But that is not the way this story is told. Here God wants to know something. God genuinely does not know how obedient, how faithful, how trusting, Abraham will be. It shows us a face of God that we'd rather not see, a God who demands, a God who doesn't control human actions, obedience, or response.

And so in chapter 22 in the first verse, it says God tested Abraham. As the story progresses Abraham follows the instructions and goes to the mountain taking wood and fire and binds up Isaac. He lifts his hand with the knife in it to kill his son. Then in verse 12 we read, "I now know that you revere God."

Many of us would like something we might call Christianity Lite. It's a Christianity that takes all the pesky inconvenience and demands out of Christianity. It's a Christianity that makes no demands to do anything uncomfortable - certainly nothing life-changing or life-threatening. This story is about Abraham's sacrifice, rather than the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham must sacrifice his doubt. He must sacrifice the control he wants to exert over his own life and put total trust in God's promises. Isaac's life is never in danger. If Abraham couldn't lift the knife, Isaac would live. If Abraham did lift the knife, God would stop him.

What God wants from Abraham is not Isaac's death but Abraham's heart. God discovered Abraham's faith and announced, "now I know that you fear God." God has always tested God's people in order to know the level of trust they have in God. James reads, "My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy."³ After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance." (Jam 1:2-3 CEB) God wants our hearts first before our sacrifices. First Samuel 15:22, "Listen to this: obeying is better than sacrificing, paying attention is better than fat from rams." (CEB) The prophet Micah wrote in chapter 6, "With what should I approach the LORD and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves?"⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?"⁸ He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8 CEB)

God wants to know if we understand divine gifts as pure gifts - not possessions or entitlements. God gives us possessions and we idolize them. God gives us work, and we worship it. This story is about God calling us to trust him to provide, to give God our sole allegiance and trust. Along the way, God tests us. Proverbs 17:3 reads, "A crucible is for silver and a furnace for gold, but the LORD tests the heart." (CEB) No person . . . No possession . . . No dream . . . No career can stand between us and God. God demands that we let go of what we hold most precious. Jesus said if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34) The church has too many un-"discipled" disciples. In this kind of discipleship, giving becomes a mathematical equation rather than a heartfelt offering. Prayer becomes an issue of time management instead of spiritual quiet to know God. Serving others is an opportunity to put another notch on the spiritual belt, rather than a deeply embedded desire to serve God. Do we give God lip service - or do we give our heart?

Willimon and Hauerwas tell this story. "A number of years ago Millard Fuller spoke to a group of college students at Duke University. He told them about how he and his wife prayerfully decided to sell everything they had, leave a successful law practice, moved to a poor neighborhood in Americus, Georgia and served the poor in that community. They started building houses for poor people, and Habitat for Humanity was born. After Fuller spoke on that occasion, several people in the audience inquired about the Fuller's children: how old were they when they moved to Georgia, and how did the

move affect them? Did the Fuller's really consider their children's needs when they made this decision? Behind the questions was this concern: it is fine if people want to make a sacrifice for a religious commitment, but it's not fine to drag their children along, uproot their lives, and sacrifice them for the sake of their parent's values. Here's the irony: don't all parents by the way they live, sacrifice their children to their own values?"ⁱⁱ If we live vicariously through our children, we sacrifice them on the altar of our dreams that never came true. We want them to be the athlete we never were, the good student we never were, have the prosperous career we never had. Or we can sacrifice them on the altars we built for ourselves, expecting our children to have the same occupation that we do, live in the same town that we do, and share our love for fishing, or baking, or State or Carolina. Even worse, we can sacrifice our children on the altar of our own selfish desires, neglecting them by being workaholics, or alcoholics, or wrapped up in our own hobbies and pleasures. Few of us devote our hearts to God like Millard Fuller and live our life as such a good model for our children.

The story of Abraham's sacrifice is an extremely difficult story to hear because it stands at odds with contemporary spirituality that emphasizes what God can do for you. This story is about what God demands of you. The testing times for Israel and 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. It is hard to remain faithful even in the face of situations that seem to deny the promises of God. If we're honest with ourselves, we have to humbly admit that we often fall short of the goal. The question is: Are we aimed in the right direction? Are we working to reach the goal?

The Apostle Paul was often a man of many words. However, he summed up the message of Genesis 22 in one sentence in Romans 12:1. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Amen and Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

Like Abraham we are called by God to be a blessing to others.

Like Abraham we have admirable qualities and considerable flaws.

And if like Abraham we spend time in dialogue with God, we will be changed!

ⁱ The practice was disgusting to God. Centuries later, the law of Moses would deal directly with this practice. In Leviticus chapter 18 verse 21, we read you must not give any of your children to offer them over to Molech so that you do not defile your Lord's name: I am the Lord. Later in chapter 20 verse two it says any Israelite or any immigrant living in Israel who gives their children to Molech must be executed. The common people will stone such a person. Centuries later, during a battle between Israel and Moab, the king of Moab took his oldest son and offered him only the wall of the city as a burnt offering. As a result outrage was expressed by Israel. So they pulled back from Moab skiing and return to their own country." This action was so disgusting that it drove the Israelites away from even engaging them in battle.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *The Truth About God* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1999) p 38