

Sermon for Sunday, September 14, 2025

Genesis 21:1-3 and 22:1-24

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I said at the opening of worship this Scripture passage is one of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible. Numerous books and essays have been written in an attempt to explain this passage. It's tempting to avoid this text but doing so isn't helpful to people who are trying to figure out what this "faith in God" thing is all about. Because of the difficulty I spent lots of time studying this week and I want to acknowledge that I was influenced by a commentary written by the late Dr. Walter Brueggeman, one of the foremost Old Testament scholars of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

One quick and easy way to explain this passage is to say that it is known that human sacrifices occurred in certain cultures at the time of Abraham. The argument has been made that this passage is the way that God and the Bible ban human sacrifice and institute animal sacrifice as a replacement for human sacrifice. But Dr. Brueggeman, in his commentary on this passage stated, "It is of no value to find in this story an exchange of animal sacrifice for human sacrifice, as it addresses much more difficult issues. (Interpretation: Genesis, Brueggeman, page 186)" The ancient theologians who told this story and included it in the Bible could have left it out: but they didn't because this passage tackles issues about God. When we hear this passage we are called to address difficult issues about God and about our faith in this God.

The primary purpose for the Holy Bible is to describe God's relationship with humans. For no reason that is ever explained in the Bible God chose to develop a relationship with Abraham. Dr. Brueggeman wrote, "With some vacillation [up to this point in the narrative,] Abraham has been a man of faith, trusting in God's promise....But in our present text, unexpected things happen. Only now do we see how serious faith is. This is a narrative of anguished faith." (pg 185) "This is a narrative of anguished faith."

While Abraham and Sarah faithfully believe that God will provide a son even when it appears biologically impossible, they wait for years for the promise to come to fruition. In the meantime there

are some rather odd stories re' Abraham that indicate that he, like all of us, is only human. Sometimes his faith falters.

We read in chapter 21 that at last, a child is born and he is named Isaac—a word whose root is connected with the word laughter—indicating Sarah's delight in bearing a son. However, Isaac's birth is not the end of the story and the Scripture moves quickly from the story of his birth to God's command to sacrifice this child for whom Abraham and Sarah have waited many long years.

Relationship: one interpretation of chapter 22 is that "God wants to know something... It is not a game with God. God genuinely does not know [the depth of Abraham's faithfulness]. "The flow of the narrative accomplishes something in the awareness of God. God did not know. Now he knows." (pg 187) God's relationship with Abraham is incomplete and God needs to know something more about him and about his faith. I recognize that we have been taught for many years that God is all-knowing and coming to the conclusion that God doesn't know something about the depth of Abraham's faith disturbs us. How can it be that an all-knowing God doesn't know the depth of his faith and by extension, the depth of our faith? This question is not addressed in today's reading. [It seems that the God who created humans continues to learn about humans; about how they work mentally and spiritually. Humans are complex and perhaps God does not realize (at least at this point) that humans are capable of woodenly obeying even when it means the death of a beloved son.)

Chapter 22:8 is the central point/pivot point of today's reading. When Abraham answers Isaac's question in verse 8: "God will provide" we hear a statement of utter trust and confidence, but one that is quite open-ended. Abraham does not tell Isaac all he wants to know because Abraham himself does not know. He does not know at this moment if Isaac is God's act of provision. He does not know that God will provide a rescue for Isaac. It could be either way....Abraham does not know, but he trusts unreservedly.... Abraham finds his only refuge in the divine provider whom he finds inscrutable [hard to explain, mysterious] but reliable. Abraham has turned from his own way to the way of God which lies beyond his understanding but upon which he is prepared to act in concrete ways. (pg 188) Abraham's faith is deeper than God has previously recognized and God now realizes that the faith of this man is so deep and so trusting that he will do whatever God asks, even to the point of sacrificing his son.

Part of the point of this story is recognizing that God tests AND God provides. We have to recognize that this is a story about both. Yes, God tests. Sometimes God allows testing to occur. Both can be stated because there is Scriptural witness to both. Additionally this story demonstrates that God also provides.

Does God really test in this way? As this story tells it, God certainly does test Abraham. Being tested by God may also be something that makes us deeply uncomfortable. Is it necessary for each of us to be tested by God? Christians should not take any comfort in concluding that this example is exclusive to the Old Testament. There are stories and teachings in the New Testament from both Jesus and Paul that make the same point. We worship each Sunday in front of a window of Jesus kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane. It visually depicts a moment when Jesus is tested. At this moment he made a choice. He could have walked away, hidden himself and avoided the cross. But he does not. He trusts that God will provide.

Sometimes God will be the root of the testing (as in the story of Abraham) and at other times God will allow the forces of evil in the world to be the root of the testing (as in the story of Jesus' arrest & crucifixion.) This is consistent with the petition in the Lord's prayer in which we ask, "save us from the time of trial" or "lead us not into temptation." Nowhere is it more visible than in this prayer. (pg. 190)

Testing and provision: this narrative asserts that we must decide about relying only on the promise. The testing is finally inescapable. To assert that God provides requires a faith as intense as does the conviction that God tests. It affirms that God, only God and no other, is the source of life.

One truth regarding this deeply challenging story is that it cannot be explained. I cannot tell you "why" God acted in this manner. All I can say is that this "text leads us to face the reality that God is God....God insists on being trusted only and totally....God is shown to be freely sovereign just as he is graciously faithful. That God provides shows his gracious faithfulness. That God tests is a disclosure of his free sovereignty."

God is not a logical premise who must perform in rational consistency. God is a free lord who comes as he will. As the "high and holy One," God tests to identify his people, to discern who is serious about faith and to know in whose lives he will be fully God. Faith is nothing other than trust in the power of the resurrection

against every deathly circumstance. Abraham knows beyond understanding that God will find a way to bring life even in this scenario of death. That is the faith of Abraham. That is the faith of the listening community. And that is the meaning of the ram at the last moment. A substitute is not brought by Abraham but given **by** God in God's inscrutable graciousness. (pg 193)

Let's be honest—to our modern ears this Scripture is a reading of violence. Many are the people who have asked how any of us: both Jew and Christian can believe in a God who requires a human sacrifice in order to declare people sin-free. But this story isn't about human sacrifice. The point of this story is to demonstrate that God tests and God provides. This story is about the depth of Abraham's faith in the face of the unthinkable. Our country is going through a very difficult time just now. One could say that we are going through a time of deep testing. This story challenges us to hang on in faith like Abraham; to persevere and trust that we will ultimately experience God's provision.

Let's pray: Good and gracious God, you taught that faith the size of a mustard seed is big enough to move mountains. Be with us through the storms of life. Help us to cling to that bit of faith that you have given to us. Help us to trust that there is a way through the testing. Help us to trust that you will provide. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Interpretation: A Bible Commentary Series for Teaching and Preaching. Genesis, by Dr. Walter Brueggeman, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.