

July 12 2020 – Worthy of Trust

Genesis 22:1-19

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 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." 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. 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?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

Message: Worthy of Trust

Our Scripture reading today,
about Abraham, Isaac and God,
is one of the more well-known, if perhaps not well-loved,
episodes recounted in the Old Testament.

For those of us who have read these verses many times,
it's perhaps easy to mentally skim over
just how truly shocking and incomprehensible it is.
And it is an awful story,
one that involves planning to sacrifice a child.

But let's set aside our gut-reaction to what's in the story for now,
and think about what the story is really about...
...which is still shocking and unsettling.

Back at the beginning of Genesis 12, God made Abraham a promise:
that there would be land and many descendants,
enough to make a great nation of God's people,
and that they would be blessed,
but, more importantly,
Abraham and his family had a role too –
they would be a blessing to other nations,
and they would be the way
through which God
would be made known
to all people,
not just Israel.

Abraham and his wife Sarah, though,
didn't have any children until they were quite old –
old enough that having a baby was extremely unlikely,
if not impossible.

So this child, Isaac, was a miraculous gift from God,
and practically the living embodiment
of God's covenant promises to Israel
and through Israel, to the world.

And then we read this:
God 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."

For God, who wants to reach out to all of humanity
and draw them into relationship with him,
for him to do this –
it makes no sense at all.

He's told Abraham to, in effect,
sacrifice the promise made between them,
to sacrifice hope
and the future unfolding
of God's covenant with Israel.

Is God going back on his promise?
That's an unhappy, unsettling thought.

But it's all a test, apparently;
God stops Abraham and provides a ram to substitute for Isaac,
and the future is back on track.

That kind of makes it worse, doesn't it?
First God seemed arbitrary,
as though he'd changed his mind about Abraham and his people,
and now he seems cruel,
testing Abraham by making him walk three days
with his son towards Moriah,
towards having to kill his own child,
towards this awful fate.

This episode is quite early on in the Bible
– imagine if you were reading the Bible in order for the first time,
and came upon Genesis 22.
You might not care to read much further!

And for those who are perhaps more comfortable
with the New Testament than the Old,
you might point to this story as an example
of why the Old Testament is confusing and unappealing
for modern Christians.

And it's true, the Old Testament is challenging.
Ancient Hebrew culture and the geographical and cultural landscape
of the Ancient Near East are quite different from ours.
Names, places, events, empires...
...it's all unfamiliar to most of us, outside of the Bible.
The writing styles are all over the place, too –
you've got poetry, history, and wisdom
all mixed in together.
It's a confusing read at best.

But as different as these things are,
it might be the similarities that make us most uncomfortable.
Humanity is exposed here in the OT
in all its pettiness, pride, self-interest,
cowardice, violence and ugliness
in ways that it isn't in the New Testament.

But humanity's good qualities are showcased too
 – courage, wisdom, love, friendship
 and above all, the capacity to have faith in God
 in a challenging world.

The point of this story,
 of Abraham and God and Isaac,
 is not to make people want to believe in God.
 The Bible is written by and for people who believe
 God exists already and believe *in* him, too.

So this difficult and confusing story exists
 to help people who already believe
 make sense of their most difficult experiences,
 when God seems to take back everything
 they have ever received from him.

In other words, the point is not to draw people in,
 but to help people who are already in stay in
 – stay in relationship with the one true God,
 even when their world turns upside down.

This story appears, front and centre in Genesis,
 where no reader of the Bible can miss it,
 because the hard truth is that
 the world turns upside down for the faithful
 more often than we like to admit.
 The 22nd chapter of Genesis is a place we can go
 when we don't understand at all
 what God allows us to suffer or seems to ask us to bear.

It's a place for us to go when we are beyond anything we thought could happen,
 beyond anything we imagined God would ever ask of us;
 when the most sensible thing to do would be to deny
 that God exists at all, or that he cares at all
 or that he has any power at all.
 That would be the sensible, reasonable thing to do
 – except we can't do it.
 We can't deny God, because, like Abraham,
 God and the faith and love and grace
 that are gifts of God
 are so deeply interwoven
 into the fabric of our lives

that to deny any of it would be to
deny our own heart and soul
and mind.

To deny God's meaningful place in our lives
would be to deny the reality of our own existence and experience.
And so we're stuck, with our pain and our incomprehension,
and the only way to move at all
is to move toward God.
And that's what Abraham does.

Without understanding why,
probably horrified at the thought of hurting his beloved miracle child Isaac,
Abraham follows God's lead
for the simple and sufficient reason
that it is God who is leading.
Abraham trusts God.

But we have to ask – is God worthy of that trust?
What kind of God would submit Abraham to this 'test',
as the Scripture refers to it?

There are two possible answers.
One answer is that God is evil, and likes to cause people pain and fear.
But this answer is biblically and historically impossible;
if God were evil, then the rest of the Bible,
including Jesus, is a lie,
and so is everything we have ever or will ever
say and sing here in this church.

So we're left with answer number two,
which is that God calls for this test because the outcome is important:
Abraham needs to know how serious this promise is
that exists between him and God.
He needs to know how completely God is trusting him,
and how far his own trust in God extends.
Abraham needs to know
that he is worthy of the trust
God is placing in him.

After the whole story with the flood and Noah and his family,
when God almost gave up on us,
after we had filled the whole world
with violence and corruption and evil
and God had taken action to stop us,

he decides to move forward
 in relationship with humanity
 on this condition:
 From now on, Abraham and his descendants
 will be the one channel for the sharing of God's blessing.

So now we come to it: God has staked it all on Abraham.
 But there is good reason to doubt
 that Abraham has staked everything on God.

You might remember those stories of Abraham
 passing his wife Sarah off as his sister
 when they were travelling through foreign territory.
 So Sarah gets taken into the royal harem as a concubine,
 not once but twice,
 and Abraham gets protected status
 as her "brother."

God never told Abraham to do that.
 Abraham did it because he was scared;
 he might get killed if someone wanted Sarah
 and knew she was his wife.
 Abraham put Sarah in that terrible situation
 because he did not trust God
 to pull them through the danger.
 There are other stories like this, too.

God is counting on Abraham
 to be this channel of blessing
 for overcoming sin and evil in our world.
 But if Abraham doesn't totally trust God,
 then it's not going to work.
 If Abraham tries to secure his own well-being apart from God,
 if he holds back anything, even his beloved child,
 and tries to protect him from God,
 then God's plan to redeem and renew creation,
 God's mission to heal and to save,
 will be over before it starts.
 That is what this test is about:
 trust, the delicate yet potentially durable link between God and ourselves.

Now, yes, God could choose someone else,
 and some other means to save us.
 But God chose Abraham,

and Abraham needed to understand exactly what that meant.

Placed front and center in the Bible,
 this story makes it clear that faith is not in the first instance
 a matter of what we think about God,
 any more than a good marriage or our deepest friendships
 are held together by what we think about the other.
 No, in every case the relationship endures only
 because two hearts are bound together
 through mutual trust.

And trust is of course the very opposite of compulsion.
 Trust is how you relate to others when you don't try to control them
 by force or manipulation.
 God doesn't make us behave or force us to be good;
 that's why there's sin in the world.
 The reason he doesn't is because he wants
 real, genuine, loving relationship.
 And that's the astonishing truth this story reveals:
 God chooses to relate to us not by compulsion but by trust.
 And we can be disappointed by the ones we trust,
 and very deeply hurt;
 God, remember, was "grieved to the heart"
 by human evil, as the flood story tells us.
 And he suffered the same things
 that we all do in the person of Jesus,
 who was both God and human.

Each of us has undoubtedly already experienced deep disappointment or grief,
 and it would be naïve to think that no more pain lies before us.
 Everything and everyone in this world is passing away,
 sooner or later.
 Now what kind of a way is this for running the world,
 with pain and disappointment on both sides?

And the answer is:
 this is the way of love and faith,
 because, in spite of the heartache,
 it's only where there's mutual trust
 that love is completely free to act
 and faith can really grow.

Deep, abiding faith can't be ordered or forced,
any more than real love manipulates or coerces.
Trust is the only environment
in which love is wholly free to act for our good,
and in which it makes sense for our faith to sustain us.
This is what we see in Jesus' death and resurrection;
this is what is woven through the whole story of God and His people,
from start to finish:
trusting love that suffers on both sides,
and working through that love,
God's boundless power to save.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.