

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 28, 2020

GENESIS 22:1-14 | PSALM 13 | ROMANS 6:12-23 | MATTHEW 10:40-42

The story of Abraham and Isaac is both very simple and very complicated. As a narrative, it's very simple. God tells Abraham to kill Isaac, Abraham tries to kill Isaac, and then God steps in at the last minute and says, "Oh, actually, there's a ram in the bushes. Why don't you kill that instead?"

But when you make that narrative part of scripture, it's becomes very complicated. To take the obvious questions, why would God test Abraham? Why does God command Abraham to kill someone? Why does God admit to learning something new about Abraham? And, perhaps most perplexing, why is Abraham's reward for this display of faith the same thing God promised him in the first place?

None of these questions ever totally resolve themselves in a completely satisfactory way. There's a reason why this story has been argued over for millennia with no clear answers. Today, I'm going to give you a little unorthodox take on how to read this story. The way we're used to reading this story, the way Luther read this story, is to assume that the command to kill Isaac came from God and then Abraham is to be praised because he trusts God's commands above all else. The more unorthodox way to read this story is the way Immanuel Kant read it. When God commanded Abraham to kill his son, Kant reasoned, Abraham should have reasoned that God could not possibly be telling him this. In other words, the command to kill Isaac comes not from God but from Abraham's own desire to prove his faithfulness. In other words, this is not a story of God testing Abraham's faith, but as a story of Abraham rationalizing an act of violence as a way to prove his devotion.

The real heart of the disagreement comes at the very beginning when the authors talk about "testing." I would guess that the root of our discomfort with the story is with its idea of God testing Abraham. The problem with testing is that it feels arbitrary and somewhat fake. If someone says they were just testing us, we'd probably feel like they were just making up challenges. But when the biblical authors talk about testing, they have something different in mind. Testing isn't a fake experiment dropped in from the outside the system but something that emerges within our lives when we follow God's call.

Think, for example, of Jesus advising the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane not to be led into temptation. In other words, pray that you don't have to choose between life and death, faith and fear. When we pray the Lord's Prayer every week and ask that God would not "lead us into temptation," that's essentially what we're asking. Guide us away from places where our faith might be eroded and we would be tempted to grab hold of easy answers.

I think that's really what the authors of this story were getting at. Not at some one-off event where God makes up a test to try to fool Abraham, but a universal experience where we feel as if our faith bears the weight of the world. How often do we see something, whether it's in our neighborhood or on the news, and wonder why God isn't involved in righting the situation? A crisis that puts some kind of claim on us and says, "What are you going to do now?" And so we feel as if we have to prove ourselves.

In a way, that's sort of what this story is about. It begins as a very strange story, what's all this stuff about someone killing his son to prove his love for God, but look around at the world and you'll find all sorts of examples of this. People who feel themselves being tested by the world and responding in all the wrong ways. Because when we find ourselves in those situations of testing, those times of trial, our impulse is often to try to find a way to display just how much faith we have. In the case of Abraham, this means being willing to give up his son Isaac. How much does Abraham love God? Enough to give up the sign of God's covenant with him. If this feels incoherent to you, like it doesn't make any logical sense, that means you understand the depth of the problem.

It's easy to think about examples of this kind of incongruity that emerges when people's faith is tested. Religious extremists are a good example of this. We often talk about religious extremists as if they are

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the true believers, but they're really not. What many religious extremists have in common is a deep sense of insecurity over their own salvation and a growing sense of disaffection from the people around them. I've said this before, but oftentimes the problem with religious extremists isn't that they're too extreme. It's that they're not extreme enough. They claim to seek only divine ends, but they use whatever human means they can to get there. And the result, whether it's a terrorist trying to gain eternal life by bringing about death or Abraham's attempt to prove his faith by killing Isaac, strikes us as totally incoherent.¹

So is there anything positive in here? Is it all fear and trembling, existential crisis after existential crisis? Or does the story give us some kind of remedy for its diagnosis? I think it does. It's God who provides. In Hebrew, *raah*. In this story, God provides a ram to be sacrificed. In other words, God provides a way out of this cycle of death and destruction that Abraham is about to embark on. When Abraham is about to make a choice with irreversible consequences, God intervenes and provides a different way forward. As Abraham himself says, "God will provide." So I don't need to run around trying to prove my devotion, but I can trust that God will provide what I need.

See, we often read this story as a near-death experience for Isaac. And it is. But it is really Abraham who experiences a kind of death in the story. He enters the story believing he has to prove his devotion, his piety to God, and he leaves the story a fundamentally changed person. It's a sort of death and resurrection experience for him. What he leaves behind on that mountain is his insecurity about his own faithfulness and devotion, his own grasping to prove his worthiness to God. And he gains a new understanding of God. That God can be trusted. That God is faithful. That God will provide. It's not a coincidence that Abraham names the mountain *The LORD will provide* and not *Look at how faithful I am*.

So what does all that mean for us? Well, since we started with the idea of testing, let's end with the idea of testing, too. From the perspective of death, the test in the story is whether Abraham is willing to kill Isaac in order to prove his love for God. This test only leads to more death and more destruction. But from the perspective of life, from the perspective of God who provides, the test in the story is what Abraham does now. Having been brought face-to-face with the lengths he is willing to go to to justify himself, what will Abraham do next? Will he abandon Isaac out of fear that he will take revenge on him? Or will he commit to loving him despite his own shortcomings? The answer, as we know, is the latter.

All of which means that the act of faith is not being willing to kill. The act of faith is not to give up God's gifts to prove our devotion. And the act of faith is not using other people as means to our own spiritual ends. The act of faith is committing to love those whom we have wronged. The act of faith is living alongside those who could rightfully accuse us. The act of faith is not running away from the wastes of our wraths and sorrows, but trusting that God will provide.

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¹ Somewhat-related sidebar I find kind of interesting. In 1984, a Lutheran theologian named George Lindbeck wrote a book entitled *The Nature of Doctrine*. One of the problems he was trying to get at was what it means for our language about God to be true. One of the interesting ideas that he talks about is how our claims about God can be disproven by our actions. During the middle ages, when crusaders would travel around the middle east pillaging "heathen" lands, their battle cry was "Christus est Dominus." Or "Christ is Lord." We would say that "Christ is Lord" is a true statement. But if you shout "Christ is Lord" while killing someone, Lindbeck suggests, you have actually disproven the statement because you're showing you don't actually believe it to be true.