

**“God, Are You Serious?”**  
Sermon by Lisa Crismore  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – July 2, 2017

Genesis 22:1-14

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, who 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 has 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 our 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 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 shall be provided.”

How many of you love taking tests? As a student, your teachers gave you tests to see how much you had learned about a particular subject in school. My husband has his students do playing tests on their musical instruments to see where to place them in his orchestra. My brother in-law, Tom, use to be an Engineer for Allison’s Transmission. His job was to test the newly designed parts to see if they were built properly and could withstand long-term wear. My children when they were little would test me as a parent to see how far they could go with breaking the rules before I would correct them. Now, I certainly never remembered doing this to my parents (wink-wink) but I am sure I did. Then, there are the dreaded medical tests. The ones like my friend, Joyce Aumiller, has to take every 3 months to see if her cancer has returned or the tests my parent’s friend, Joyce Mayer, had to undergo to see if she had cancer.

We use tests to seek out information. This is exactly what God was doing in our scripture today. Genesis tells us that “After these things, God tested Abraham.” God wanted to seek out the faith of Abraham. So, we hear the worst thing that we can imagine come from God. God commands Abraham to go and take Isaac to a mountain where he is to offer him as a burnt sacrifice. What? Are you serious, God? Why would God do this?

Abraham had been through so much with God at his side. He had left his home at God’s command to go to a destination unknown. Abraham with no questions asked, moved him and his wife, Sarah and they went. Sarah and him found themselves in a famine and had to flee to Egypt where he almost lost his wife, Sarah to Pharaoh. He had to go through land issues with his nephew, Lot. He watched the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham was blessed at the age of 100 to receive news that his barren wife, Sarah was going to have a baby, which was a true gift from God. Prior to this, his wife, Sarah, had ordered him to have a child with her slave girl, Hagar. After the child was born, Sarah ordered Abraham to send them both away which Abraham did

because God told him to follow Sarah's orders. In the end, God saves and blesses Hagar and her child, Ishmael.

Throughout this entire time, **Abraham has obeyed God!** Abraham has done everything that God has asked of him. So, why would God need to test him further? Why would God ask him to sacrifice his son, Isaac?

It makes no sense that God would take Isaac after giving Isaac to Abraham. It makes no sense that God would make a covenant with Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation and this promise would come from the offspring of Isaac.

None of this makes sense and yet, Abraham responds with true obedience and bizarre faith. He asks no questions. He quickly gathers the wood, saddles the donkey and calls a couple of his young servants to come with him. He fetches 10, 11 or 12 year old, Isaac.

Perhaps, the loving relationship that Abraham and God built allows Abraham to put the demands of God before his only beloved son. Perhaps, Abraham is hoping that somewhere along that long walk up to the mountain, God will have him change course and save Isaac. We hear Abraham three times respond by saying, "Here I Am." Once in response to God. The second time in response to Isaac. The third time in response to the angel. Abraham is attentive throughout the entire story. Is this his way of saying, "Here I am. Where are you?"

It is though Abraham hopes with all his heart that God will not go through with this. He tells the 2 young servants that "we" will return after Isaac and I worship. When Isaac questions where is the sacrificial lamb, Abraham answers, "The Lord will provide the lamb for sacrifice." Abraham makes the decision to continue with piling the wood up for the fire and tying down Isaac. It is only when the knife is raised to make the final blow does the angel of the Lord call out for Abraham to stop him.

Abraham passed the test. It is clear that because of Abraham's fear of the Lord or his awe and honor of the Lord, God responds by sparing Isaac. It is the Lord, who provides a ram for the sacrifice. When the day is done, the Lord provides and Isaac is saved.

This is a familiar story. But, it is one story that we are not too eager to hear. One story that I am not too eager to preach. We have a difficult time in understanding why God would ask Abraham to do this. I wonder how this effected the relationship of Abraham and Isaac? Did God care about this?

I wonder what this story means to the parent who has lost their child. I wonder what this story says to those of us who have sacrificed something for our faith. When our faith has been through the test, we experienced loss.

These are not easy questions to answer. There are no clear-cut and dry answers when it comes to this text or simply when it comes to understanding everything about God. We feel this pull back and forth of God taking and God giving.

Walter Brueggeman says, *"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. Abraham comes to an awareness that the two marks of God are always encountered together. Martin Luther is correct to say that no human reason or philosophy comprehends these two marks of God. Faith is the readiness to answer to this strange contradiction in God."* (Interpretation - Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; by Walter Brueggeman; John Knox Press; 1982; p. 189)

Faith is the readiness to answer to this strange contradiction in God. God can be a mystery. We can't tie God up in a simple package. So, we must hold on to what we do know.

*I struggled with how this ended in my sermon. As I struggled with the ending, I have decided to change this part of the manuscript from when I preached it. This does not follow the recorded version or what you heard in the service.*

We know that God loves us! God put himself in Abraham shoes; sent Jesus, his only beloved son, to the earth; and sacrificed him on a cross. God heard him cry in the garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." God experienced the pain and suffering of Jesus' crucifixion. He did that not to test but to save us. He did it because he loved us.

God loved Abraham, too. Even though Abraham was tested and challenged, God always provided for him as well. Just as God provides for us. This communion meal that we will share in a few minutes is a sign of God's love and providence for our lives. This meal nourishes us for the trials and tests that we encounter. This meal provides restoration for our faith as we continue on our journey. It reminds us of the saving grace which Jesus Christ provided for us.

The ways that God provides for us is sometimes easy to see and other times difficult. I remember the times on the Camino when life was simple and it was clear how God provided for me. There are times when it is downright difficult when we are blinded by the challenges and can't see God's hand at work. Those times when there is an illness or death or financial struggles or you name it.

Then, are the tests or challenges that we experience, God's hand, poor choices we or someone else makes or are they just happen stance? And, does this really matter when all we need to do is rely on faith to believe that God's love will provide a way through whatever comes our way?

Thanks be to God for the faithful story of Abraham who weathered the storm of testing and received the providence of God's gift. May we be so bold and hold onto our faith like Abraham. Amen.