

I'd like to start today with a confession – I've always enjoyed taking tests. I'm kind of nerdy like that. There's just something very satisfying about studying hard, knowing the right answers, and being given a chance to prove it. Most of my life I've done pretty well on tests. But there was one exception – three years ago when I moved here and had to take the NC drivers license test. Despite the warning from the nice man at the DMV who told me I might want to look over the practice test, I knew that wouldn't be necessary. Instead I decided not to prepare even a single minute and I promptly went in and failed the test.

In my defense, some of the questions were ridiculous. Who cares whether reckless driving or driving without a license is punished with more points? I'm not planning to do either of them. But regardless, I didn't spend time studying. I didn't put in the work. And when the time came for me to show what I knew, I didn't know enough. And I failed the test. Wouldn't you know that night I went home and studied and the next day I went back and passed. It was much easier to know how to respond after I put in the time to prepare properly.

As a church we are in the midst of our stewardship campaign. Stewardship examines how we give of ourselves in response to God's generosity to us. God calls us to give the same way God gives to us – sacrificially. Jesus gave absolutely everything for us, and that's our model for how we're to give.

Today's scripture is one of the most famous stories about sacrificial giving. It's also one of the most difficult texts in all of scripture. And it all begins with a test. Hear this word from Gen 22.

Gen 22:1 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 kill 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"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 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, 18 and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." 19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

The word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**

One of the reasons this text is difficult is that it's hard to read without having an emotional response to it. How could God command child sacrifice? What kind of God does that? Some scholars think that's the point – God was providing a polemic against it, God was speaking out against a religious culture where that practice was prevalent. But still the idea is absolutely revolting to us. We're rightly repulsed by it. I want to ask you to hold back that feeling for now. Instead I'd like to focus on what the text says about God testing. And what the text says about God providing. What's harder to believe – that God tests us or that God will provide for us?

The first thing we read says that God tested Abraham. Our initial response might be to bristle at that. Does God really test us? As it turns out, the idea of God testing people shows up frequently in scripture.

God tests

- Job – most famous
- The Psalms also speak of testing (Ps 7:9; 17:3 If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; Ps 26:2 Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.)
- **Ex 20:20** [After giving of 10 C's] Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."
- **Deut 8:2** Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.
- Purpose of God's tests: reveal our hearts.
 - o **Deut 13:3** for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.
 - o Testing is not capricious exercise or game for God. God is not sitting in heaven with his red pen poised to mark us down. God is not pulling puppet strings.
 - o The point of testing is to reveal to God and to the people being tested the condition of their hearts
 - o Testing gives us an opportunity to show our trust in God
- **Walter Brueggemann:**¹ God tests to identify his people, to discern who is serious about faith and to know in whose lives he will fully be God.

¹ On screen please

God tested Abraham

Abraham was prepared to respond correctly because Abraham had already seen God's faithfulness.

- Gen 12
 - o God says go to a land I will show you, Abraham went.
 - Not without stumbles – lied twice about his wife to save himself
 - o God says I'll make of you a great nation – all nations blessed through you
- Gen 15
 - o Abraham says Umm... about that great nation thing, I still don't have any children!
 - o God makes covenant with Abraham – look at the stars – so shall your descendents be!
 - o Abraham believed and God counted it to him as righteousness
 - YET takes matters into own hands – Ishmael born to Hagar, Sarai's maid
- Gen 17-18
 - o God reaffirms covenant, renames Abraham and Sarah, promises them son
 - o Sarah laughs, but God delivers, even though Abraham is 100 years old.
 - Gen 21:1 The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised.
- Through all this, Abraham had opportunities to walk with God, trust God further, realize God's faithfulness at every step along the way. Even when things seemed unlikely, or impossible. Even when God's promises were threatened or seemed like they'd never be fulfilled. The Lord did as he had promised. And Abraham's faith grew stronger.

Gen 22:1 After these things (all those steps toward faithfulness), God tested Abraham.

But Abraham was prepared. Abraham was ready for the opportunity to show what he had learned in his relationship with God, his life experience of walking with God. Just like in Gen 12, God says again to Abraham, "Get up and go to the place where I will show you." Except this time he also says "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering."

There is a Yiddish folk tale that goes something like this: Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, "If you want to command death, do it yourself."²

God asks Abraham to give up in faith the only concrete evidence he has of God's faithfulness – his only beloved son Isaac. Abraham is asked to destroy the only hope of God's covenant being fulfilled. You can't be the father of many nations when your only son is dead.

And yet Abraham gets up early the next morning and sets out to do it. No questions asked.

How is that possible? Because he knows God. Abraham, through his life experience with God, has been prepared for this moment. He's already studied for this test. Even though it's the hardest one he's ever had to take. He knows the answer. He knows that God is faithful. He knows he can trust in God's promises.

How do we know that? First of all, he gets up and goes without any protest. God calls and Abraham says, "Here I am."³ and this is definitely more subtle, he tells his young servants in verse 5,

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2138

“Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Did you catch that? And then *WE* will come back to you. Abraham somehow expects that Isaac will survive this. God’s covenant will remain intact. Abraham will still be the father of many nations, just as God had promised. *We will come back*. Further, when Isaac asks his dad where is the lamb for the sacrifice Abraham replies that God himself will provide the lamb. God himself will provide the lamb. Abraham has seen God provide thus far, and he trusts that God will continue to provide going forward. God will keep his promises. Somehow. Abraham is ready for this test. He’s prepared to show what he’s learned, and he’s expectant that God will act to keep his promises.

During our Wednesday night communion service this week one of you⁴ pointed out to me a story of a missionary family who traveled to New Guinea to teach the bible to the indigenous people they met there. They decided to create plays, short dramas, to act out the stories of the bible, starting from the beginning and working their way through. When they reached this story of Isaac, they told it right up to the point where Isaac gets bound on the altar, and then they stopped for the day. Nothing like a little suspense, right?

Remember, these people had never heard this story before. Yet based on their experience of hearing the bible stories leading up to this one, they knew what would happen. Four different men came up to the missionaries independently and arrived at the same conclusion. Abraham was a godly man, so he must obey God. God promised the covenant would be kept through Isaac, so Isaac must be spared. Therefore, they concluded, God will send a substitute lamb.

They expected God to act based on God’s character as it had been revealed to them in God’s word. They knew God would provide because they had studied God’s faithfulness from the beginning of the bible until this story. They were prepared. Their hearts had begun to inch closer to the heart of God. God would save Isaac by providing a substitute lamb. They just knew it. And maybe Abraham did too.

Just as Abraham is about to strike his son dead, an angel intervenes. Abraham! He says, “Here I am.” Don’t hurt him. And then God says something really interesting. Now I know that you fear the Lord, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me. Now I know.

God left it up to Abraham to decide. The covenant could have been broken. It was Abraham’s choice. And Abraham chose to listen to God’s command. To be obedient. Trusting that God would somehow make it all work out. Abraham passed the test – he loved the Lord with all his heart and soul.

Do you think God tests us today? Do you think God still wants to know what’s in our hearts? What’s the thing God might ask you to give up in order to reveal your own heart to you more clearly? What might God be asking you to be willing to put on the altar, not knowing whether you’ll get it back?

I’ve told part of this story before, so forgive me for repeating but I wanted to say more. Twenty years ago I thought I was going to marry my high school sweetheart but then it didn’t work out. After 10 years of not really dating anyone seriously I found myself in a place of deep loneliness. And then I met someone. She was smart, funny, attractive, and fun to be around. And she loved Jesus. Only problem was every time I got physically near her I could almost feel God pushing me away and saying no.

³ On screen please Gen 22:5

⁴ Rodney Duke shared this. Ee-Taow: The Mouk Story. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1N-Hdgno4w>

During this time, I was in a season of deep spiritual connection with God. I had seen God's faithfulness in selling my condo easily during a terrible housing market. I had seen God's faithfulness in job transitions despite a struggling economy. I had seen God's faithfulness in the formation of a new church in my hometown, in which I was allowed to play a leadership role. It was a time of great spiritual growth for me, a time of walking closely with God. And yet in the midst of all that I was still really lonely. And more than anything else I wanted to meet my spouse and start a family. And here was this awesome woman.

But yet these verses kept playing over and over in my mind.⁵ Ps 37:4 Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Matt 6:33 Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be given to you. As I was debating whether to pursue a dating relationship, I kept coming back to those verses. And I kept being reminded of God's faithfulness in so many other areas of my life. In the end, after a ton of prayer and some accountability discussions with my friends, I decided not to let anything happen with her. I decided to trust that God would provide the right person at the right time. And she wasn't the one, and that wasn't the time, even as badly as I wanted it to be so.

Now I don't know if that was a test or not. Honestly, I'd never even considered that possibility until the past couple weeks as I've been studying this text. And I still don't know if it was. But I will say this. During the months that immediately followed, that was when I developed strong sense of call to go to seminary and pursue becoming a pastor. At the same time, she felt a strongly called to mission work. I went to school in Chicago, she went on a mission trip overseas, and we both met our respective spouses and got married within the next year.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I had given in to my own agenda. If I hadn't been connected enough to God's word and a community of Christian friends to help me hear God's voice, where would I be today? If I hadn't been so aware of God's faithfulness in all those other areas of my life, would my heart have been prepared to trust God enough to let go? What if I hadn't been obedient? I believe God could have worked good through that situation no matter how I chose. But I also know how incredible my wife is, and I'm not sure I would have met her if I hadn't first been obedient to God's voice. And that obedience was made easier by remembering God's faithfulness and holding on to God's promises.

How is God calling you to be obedient right now? What signs of God's faithfulness from your own life do you need to be reminded of today in order for you to trust God more for tomorrow?

[INVITE WORSHIP TEAM UP]

Gen 22:13⁶ – 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."

Where have you seen the Lord provide in your life? Where has God shown up when things looked bleak or even impossible? Because we humans are such fickle people, the Israelites used to leave pillars of stones stacked up at places where God had provided. That way every time they passed by they were reminded of God's faithfulness, and their hearts were conditioned to trust God more fully. What would

⁵ On screen please Ps 37:4, Matt 6:33

⁶ On screen please Gen 22:13-14

it look like for you to create pillars of stones? When your heart is tested, in what condition will it be found?

Abraham had seen God's faithfulness again and again throughout his lifetime. So when his heart was tested, it was found in a condition of obedience. When he found himself facing an impossibly dark choice, his heart was conditioned to respond with faith. A faith built on God's faithfulness. And while we are rightly repulsed by the idea of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac, we have to remember that God didn't ask something of Abraham that God was not willing to endure himself. After all, there was another only beloved son who carried wood on his back and willingly went to his death, trusting the promise of God's provision. For Jesus, obedience meant death on a cross. And God's provision was resurrection and new life. Remember God's faithfulness, so that when we're tested our hearts will trust in God. Remember God's faithfulness, so that when God calls us to give of ourselves sacrificially, our hearts are prepared to respond in faith like Abraham and like Jesus, saying, "Yes, Lord. Here I am." Amen.

[Would you pray with me?]