



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Abraham Passed the Test . . . Did God? Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

I can't really say if I have a favorite biblical character—other than Jesus, of course. We should all say our favorite person in the Bible is Jesus, right? Other than Jesus, however, I don't know if I have a favorite from the myriad characters—some of them really *characters*—that we discover in the pages of Holy Scripture. But, of all the unforgettable and ever-intriguing characters of the biblical story, Abraham is certainly in the top five. He is a fascinating man. When you read about him in the Epistle to the Hebrews, he sounds larger than life:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

Hebrews 11:8-12

As iconic as he sounds, however, Abraham's humanity is fully on display in every page of Genesis where his story is told. At times he is that paragon of faith that the New Testament recognizes as on the occasion when God tells him to pull up stakes and move family and farm to a new land he knows nothing about. We admire someone whose faith is so strong as to risk everything, everything to do what God calls him or her to do. And, if that person can get what wants he or she most wants in life, which in Abraham's case is to have a child who will carry on his legacy, all the better!

Most of the time, however, Abraham comes off either as extremely insecure or surprisingly brash. Afraid that Pharaoh (or on another occasion,

King Abimelech) will want Sarah for his harem and kill him to get her, he conveniently fails to mention she is his wife. When his nephew Lot wants the fertile land along the Jordan River for himself, Uncle Abraham leads his family and flocks into the rocky hill country, Sarah probably fuming all the way. Yet, when the angel of the Lord threatened to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their grotesque failure to be hospitable, Abraham is bold enough to bargain with God to get a better deal for the town where his nephew lives.

All of those stories are fascinating, but the one before us today is both captivating and horrific. It is the story we know as the sacrifice of Isaac. Listen to it afresh:

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.”

Genesis 22:1-14

When this story begins, I wonder which Abraham will answer. Will it be the larger than life man of faith Abraham who left Haran in the dust in order to get to the Promised Land as soon as possible or will it be the let’s-talk-about-this-thing-first Abraham who is bold enough to argue with God. Apparently it is the Abraham honored by the writer of Hebrew, the father of the faith, the exemplar of obedience who shows up on this particular day. God says, “Take your son, the one you waited about eighty-five years to receive, the child of promise who is the key to your legacy and the cornerstone of my people, take that boy and go to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him as a burnt offering to me.” And Abraham said, “Okay!”

Scripture tells us it was a test. After Abraham had sent his other son Ishmael and his mother into the desert at Sarah’s insistence and after he had made a treaty with Abimelech, king of Gerar, the Bible says God tested Abraham. The Epistle to the Hebrews indicates that Abraham passed that test with flying colors:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Hebrews 11:17-19

Yet, aren’t we left unsettled by this story? Don’t you wonder if Abraham is deranged for willingly offering his son as a sacrifice? Doesn’t it cross your mind that God is the lunatic for demanding that Abraham kill his son in order to prove his faithfulness?

Stephen Hebert, an educator who often engages in thoughtful discussions of religion, wonders what Abraham did the night before he and Isaac left for Mount Moriah. He speculates that Abraham was upset and agonized over what God was asking him to do. Should he trust this voice that kept asking absurd things of him or should he trust his gut and protect his son? In fact, Hebert notes that instead of referring to Isaac as his son, he tells the two servants to wait with the donkey while “the boy and I” go over

there and worship, an indication that he was putting some distance between himself and his son because the agony of his task was so great.¹ In other words, Abraham did not want to sacrifice his son but felt he had no choice.

I wonder if God and Abraham called each other's bluff. By that I mean, was God so used to Abraham failing to do the right thing the first time or arguing about what was the right thing to do in the first place that he was testing him to see if he would engage him in a debate about child sacrifice. After all, Abraham's Canaanite neighbors did practice child sacrifice which must have bothered Abraham and surely upset God. Did God figure he would test Abraham to see if he would be willing to engage God in a conversation about moral behavior? Did God not ever imagine that Abraham would go through with the challenge and bind his son on an altar of sacrifice?

Did Abraham, perhaps, figure that it was a test and that God would never break his pledge or risk losing the child of promise? Did Abraham really believe what he told Isaac when his son asked, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" and Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."? God had promised to provide all that Abraham and his family would need if they would go into this new land. God had kept that promise. God had provided the son of promise. Could it be that Abraham expected to prepare the altar, light the fire, and for God to provide a sacrificial lamb before he would even think about binding Isaac? Did Abraham and God perhaps surprise one another by allowing this challenge to go nearly too far with a knife hovering over the heart of Isaac?

Whatever was going on in the minds of both God and Abraham, according to the story and the interpretation in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Abraham passed the test. He proved that he would do whatever God asked of him, including sacrificing his son, believing that God would restore the son to him even from death. Abraham passed the test with flying colors, even if we might consider him a madman. But did God pass? Did God prove his faithfulness to Abraham?

The message of the story, indeed of the Gospel, is yes, God did pass the test. Abraham was right, God would and did provide the sacrifice. As soon as the cries of the angel stopped Abraham's arm in its downward

¹Stephen Hebert, "The Psychology of Abraham (Genesis 22)," *Withering Fig* (July 16, 2009); available online at: <http://www.witheringfig.com/biblical-studies/the-psychology-of-abraham-genesis-22/>.

motion, he noticed a ram caught in a thicket—a perfect sacrifice—unless, of course, you are the ram!

This story is not only about Abraham and whether or not he would do whatever God asked. It is also about God's ability to keep promises and to provide. God also passed with flying colors—and always does.

God always provides. Last week we talked about how the entire biblical story is a witness to God's generous provision of whatever we humans could ever need and our sometimes lack of faith in fearing that there is a scarcity of what we have. Abhor the story if you will, but the binding of Isaac is about God providing what is needed and Abraham trusting God to do so.

Over and over scripture bears witness to the ways in which God provides what is needed when it appears that at best our resources are limited. When the widow of Zarephath and her son were about to eat their last morsel of food and die, the prophet Elijah appeared and asked for food. The widow explained her plight but offered the prophet the hospitality of a meal. In turn, Elijah blessed the woman and the son and their jar of meal and jug of oil never went empty (I Kings 17). When Simon Peter and his brother Andrew had been out all night fishing with no luck, Jesus suggested they row out into deeper water and try again. Peter protested, but Jesus insisted. Their nets were so full of fish that they were afraid they would tear (Luke 5). After Jesus had taught the crowd number five thousand men and probably twice that many women and children, the disciples told Jesus to send the people home to get food. Instead, Jesus blessed five loaves and two fish and everyone had enough to eat with plenty left over (Luke 9). As Jesus began his ministry, he selected a small group of twelve people to be his students. When he departed this earth, there were eleven left. Still, those eleven multiplied into millions upon millions of believers through the ages. God always turns what appears to be a scarcity into an abundance. God always provides.

We could all tell personal stories of the ways in which God has provided for us throughout life. Sometimes it was the clarity of memory to do well on a test. Sometimes it was wisdom to make the right decision or courage to do the right thing. At times we have found ourselves in a tight spot economically and somehow things worked out. At other times, when relationships have been tested and frayed, God provided enough love to see us through another day and another day and another day after that. When life goes horribly wrong in one way or another, God provides family and friends and inner

strength and peace to survive. When we mess up our lives royally, God offers a second or even third chance to get us back on the path we should have been walking in the first place. We all have experienced that God provides.

Even in these very difficult days, when dealing with the coronavirus pandemic and the social and moral unrest that are calling us to be true to our humanity, God is providing what we need. Granted, we all want a cure now and a vaccine the day after, but God is providing those resources through people who have prepared for a lifetime to serve others through medical science and care. We want tempers to calm and violence to end and they will, but only when we all admit our sinfulness and repent of the ways we disregard and mistreat one another. God provides all we need to do those things. The Bible tells a long story of God's effort to teach us how to best live the life given to us. In Jesus, we discover the true person of faith, the best example of humanity and divinity combined. In Jesus, we are provided all we need to live fully and completely together.

Abraham is one of my favorite biblical characters because I identify with him. Sometimes I am on top of my game and live faithfully as God wants me to do. On many days, however, I am fearful and insecure or brash and argumentative with God, failing to be the person I truly am. On every day, God is faithful to provide exactly what I need to live as a person of faith. God is equally as generous with you. May we all live faithfully today and tomorrow and all the days that follow. Amen.

June 28, 2020

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

The goodness of this day and the stillness of this moment capture our hearts for a moment and make us think that all is right with the world, O God. What we do know is that all is right with this moment because you are with us and we know that we are not alone. Sometimes, on a beautiful day or even on a day full of sickness and anger and unrest, what we need to know most is that we are not alone. Thank you for that gift, O God.

We do offer our thanks for the goodness and wonder and beauty that are abundant all around us. Maybe we are at home more and paying closer attention, perhaps our change in behavior has cleaned the air and made the earth a more hospitable place, or maybe the gifts of nature are given to refresh our spirits when we need it most. We thank you for the world around us and for all the ways you bless us.

We thank you as well, O God, for the care being offered to people who are ill with Covid 19 or other ailments. We do pray for the development of both a cure and a vaccine so that we can be safe and live fully together. Grant strength and determination and resilience to us all. Bring healing, we pray.

Bring healing not only to our bodies but also to our minds and hearts. We may not feel that the timing of a confrontation with our treatment of one another is convenient, but truth rarely is. We pray that you will give us all insight and openness and courage to deal honestly with our past and to step bravely into our future—together. Remind us, O God, that the Savior you gave to us did not look like most of us. Remind us that we are not saved by skin color but by the grace that transforms our hearts. Remind us that we are all one in Christ and that we really should love one another.

It is a beautiful day, but it is also a frightening day, O God. Reassure us that together we can overcome this horrible illness that has caused so much pain and suffering and even death. And reassure us that we can also overcome this horrible coronavirus which is doing the same. Grant us health and life, we pray, in the name of Christ, our brother and our Lord. Amen.