

11th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

---

*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.*

---

Let me start off today's sermon by noting that I am not aware of a pastor who particularly looks forward to preaching on today's text. There may be one out there but I am unaware of him or her. It's just not a "fun" text. I'll be honest with you all; because of the unpleasantness of the text of today's sermon, I put off writing it last week as long as I possibly could. In fact, I was putting the finishing touches on it this morning because it was that tough. It's one of those texts that leaves us with a bad taste in our mouths and an uneasy feeling in our stomachs. It's one of those passages that seems to leave us with more questions than it does answers. And those passages can sometimes be the most difficult to preach (let alone listen to!).

So we are going to start off today by going ahead and getting those uneasy questions out in front of us:

- Question #1: what sort of barbaric God would ask any person to sacrifice a child, let alone one that he or she had to wait 25 years for?
- Question #2: what sort of barbaric person would even consider, for one second, killing their own child at the request of a God who made him or her wait 25 years to have him?
- Question #3: did God (assuming God knew Isaac would live) have any consideration for the significant psychological damage this event no doubt left with Isaac? I doubt Abraham and Isaac ever went out for a casual stroll the rest of their lives...

Now, I must be forthright with you all and let y'all know that these questions will not be answered in this sermon (or any sermon for that matter). We might wonder together and imagine these difficult and important questions but I would invite us to do so during coffee hour immediately following today's service.

Today's sermon is going to take a different approach.

You see, when we find ourselves in the tricky waters of difficult texts, our post-modern minds often instinctually try to "pick the text apart" and seek to "understand" the text as if it were a complicated instruction manual for putting together a piece of furniture. We often can dismiss the text as a product of its historical context and, in doing so, can do a rather clever job of holding the text at a very convenient distance.

And so, the difficult task you and I have before us this day is to allow this story to ask questions of us. But before we can do that we must stick to the text and see what it tells us.

This was a test. It says so right here in the first verse. This was a test of Abraham and, we might also presume, a test of Isaac as well. You and I are tested every day (but hopefully not too frequently with a test of such magnitude and difficulty). We can spend all day long trying to figure out *why* we are being tested and *who* it is that is testing us but the fact remains that we are tested and we learn from tests and grow from tests and prove ourselves from tests.

Abraham responds to this test with quiet acceptance. He obeys and leans toward it and for the three days between God's request and the moment that Abraham raises that deadly knife, we are left to wonder what was going on in this father's head. Perhaps the entire time leading up to it Abraham was bargaining with God with even more fervor than he did with God last week in the context of the people of the city of Sodom. I find it hard to believe that Abraham didn't bargain with God but it seems as though God wasn't as open to it as God was with the people of Sodom.

The text then tells us that Abraham spoke to his servants that were accompanying them and asked them to remind behind. Abraham then says a very interesting statement to them: he says "stay here and we will come back to you." Now, by saying "we will come back to you," suggests that either Abraham was either a) not trying to alarm their companions or b) that Abraham genuinely thought that both he and Isaac would be returning which would seem to suggest that Abraham trusted God to change God's mind. You and I cannot know for sure and we are left to make up our own minds.

Abraham prepares for the sacrifice and Isaac, who is apparently old enough to know that something is up, notices that there is no animal with them to be the sacrificed. Abraham simply tells his son that "God will provide the sacrifice."

Abraham binds his son, places Isaac on the altar, this child that he and Sarah waited 25 years for, and raises the knife. Suddenly, God cries out “stop!” and keeps Abraham from following through with this unspeakable, horrific task. A ram is found with its horns caught in a nearby bush and Abraham breathes a great sigh of relief (not to mention the sigh of relief of Isaac!).

Well, I guess when you get down to it it’s a happy ending (for everyone except the ram, that is). Just like Abraham said, both he *and* Isaac return to the camp.

And we are left with a question for ourselves courtesy of the text: what does it mean to worship both a God who tests *and* a God who provides?

I had mentioned in the class last week that when one entity does the testing and the other entity does the providing, it’s pretty clear which one to prefer over the other. But when the same entity is both the one who tests and the one who provides, we can feel somewhat torn in the middle. This should not be a completely foreign concept to us when we think about it. For example, seminary was really a four year test that had some rather brutal moments. However, that same test also provided for me the skills needed to come to Shelter Island to be your pastor. But that metaphor only goes so far; it feels quite different when it is God that tests and provides (then again, when it came to my seminary experience, maybe that was who it was all along!).

God asks things of us every day. And every day, we pray for the courage to live into those tasks with faithfulness, clarity, and courage. A humbling aspect of this passage is that, when compared to the magnitude of that which God asked of Abraham, most of the things God asks of me come nowhere near as difficult as that which was asked in today’s passage. God asked Abraham to give up the single most precious thing in his life. Therefore, perhaps when we are tempted to tell God that it’s “too much” to give up, we might remember Abraham’s test and be thankful that it is not our own.

And yet, many of us might feel like God has indeed asked too much of us. I wonder what those conversations might look like...

To close today’s sermon, I invite you to look at the painting you will find on the front of your bulletin. This is a dramatic piece by Marc Chagall entitled *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (see next page). The first aspect worth noticing is the brilliant interplay of colors that he uses with the different characters. Another beautiful aspect is the look on Abraham’s face, which one could describe as a mixture of relief and desperation. A third and final aspect of this piece I would like to direct your attention to is the upper right corner of the painting. In this corner is the unmistakable image of a man struggling to carry a wooden cross.

As Isaac wondered where the animal to be sacrificed was, Abraham shared with him a profound piece of truth: “God himself will provide the lamb for sacrifice.” Chagall’s image that we are to presume is that of Jesus carrying the cross on which he would die reminds us that the God who asked Abraham to sacrifice his son was not a God who didn’t know what that would feel like. God knew only too well the pain that would cause. And perhaps that was what led God to a change of heart. Perhaps God realized that there was no justice to be found in this act and that God alone was the one capable of bearing that burden. God only knows.

Friends, as you go about your week, remember this difficult text. Remember that we worship both the God who tests us and the God who provides for us. Remember that God asks us to do some very difficult things. But we nevertheless trust in this God because this is the same God who has done the *most* difficult thing.

