

Genesis 22:1-14 (CEB)

After these events, God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” Abraham answered, “I’m here.” God said, “Take your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him up as an entirely burned offering there on one of the mountains that I will show you.” Abraham got up early in the morning, harnessed his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, together with his son Isaac. He split the wood for the entirely burned offering, set out, and went to the place God had described to him.

On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place at a distance. Abraham said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will walk up there, worship, and then come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the entirely burned offering and laid it on his son Isaac. He took the fire and the knife in his hand, and the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father?” Abraham said, “I’m here, my son.”

Isaac said, “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the entirely burned offering?” Abraham said, “The lamb for the entirely burned offering? God will see to it, my son.” The two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place God had described to him. Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. But the Lord’s messenger called out to Abraham from heaven, “Abraham? Abraham?” Abraham said, “I’m here.”

The messenger said, “Don’t stretch out your hand against the young man, and don’t do anything to him. I now know that you revere God and didn’t hold back your son, your only son, from me.” Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the dense underbrush. Abraham went over, took the ram, and offered it as an entirely burned offering instead of his son. Abraham named that place “the Lord sees.” That is the reason people today say, “On this mountain the Lord is seen.”

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Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born. He literally waited an entire lifetime for a child, something he and Sarah both desperately wanted, in a time when having children meant everything. To not have children meant your future was uncertain as you had no one to care for you in old age. Abraham had tremendous

wealth and could rely on that wealth to pay servants to care for him and Sarah as they aged, but the average person didn't have such means, so poverty combined with childlessness could be a death sentence for those too old to work. To be childless also came with a heavy stigma. It's still stigmatized to a certain degree, but becoming less and less so, and in the ancient world children were equated with divine blessing, so someone without the ability to conceive was seen as having done something seriously wrong to offend whatever god or gods they worshiped. There were countless fertility cults geared toward appeasing various gods so that the barren could conceive; such cults were a major problem for Israel as it struggled keeping its people from idolatry. But despite the socio-economic problems around childlessness, Abraham had been promised by God that he'd be the father of a great nation, so he waited for his chance at fatherhood. He waited day after day, year after year, well past when it was normal to have children, past when most are capable of having children, and still he and Sarah were without a child. When Sarah got tired of waiting she had her servant, Hagar, become a surrogate mother, but it only made Sarah's longing to be a mother worse. Finally she conceived and it seemed like everything was looking up. Sure, they were old, but they had a child and God's promise was fulfilled.

We, as readers of scripture, have the benefit of narrative commentary to help us understand what's happening in the story. Because of that commentary, we know from the beginning that Abraham was being tested by God and that God wasn't really going to have Abraham sacrifice his son. Abraham, however, had no such knowledge. Out of the blue God called on Abraham to take his son, making sure to mention how much Abraham loved Isaac, to Moriah and offer him up as a sacrifice. Isaac wasn't to be just any sacrifice, either, he was to be given as an entirely burnt offering. In Judaism, offerings were often partially burned and the remaining was consumed by either the priests or the one giving the offering. In certain cases, however, sacrifices were made that were to be an entirely burnt offering so that every last ounce of the animal, or in this case, person, would be given to God. Obviously if the command was for a partially burnt offering, we wouldn't expect Abraham to have eaten the remainder of his son, he was no cannibal after all, what's more likely is that the remains would have been taken home and buried, or buried right there, so that there would be a physical reminder of Isaac's life. The implication of God commanding an entirely burnt offering is that Isaac was to be entirely given to God so that Abraham would have nothing left to hold on to of that son whom he loved so dearly. Let me tell you, as a relatively new father, this story hits me in a way it never did before. I can't imagine having to give up Walt for anything, much less offer him as a sacrifice, and that's what makes this text so difficult. To make matters even more distressing is that upon hearing God's command, Abraham did not question what was being asked of him. There was no back and forth between God and Abraham where Abraham tried to reason with such an unreasonable command. Abraham didn't sulk. Abraham

didn't yell or fight. He simply woke up early, packed his bags, took Isaac and a few servants to help along the trip, and began the three-day journey to the place God commanded him to go and sacrifice his beloved son.

It's incredible to me that after 100 years of waiting, and after Ishmael, his son with Hagar, had been sent away by Sarah, Abraham so willingly followed God's command to sacrifice Isaac. The only thing we can infer from Abraham's seemingly inexplicable willingness to kill his son at God's command is that he trusted fully in the promise God had made him. He had already been made a father at 100 years old, an age where his wife's ability to bear a child doesn't seem to be physiologically possible, because that's what God had promised, and God followed through even when it seemed impossible. Because God had not backed away from the promise that Abraham would be the father of a great multitude, Abraham had to trust that whatever was happening with Isaac in this situation wasn't the end. You can hear that trust as Abraham answered Isaac's question about where the lamb for the sacrifice was, he said "God will see to it." If you really think about it, that level of trust is almost unfathomable. If you were to want something your whole life, and you finally got it, most of us would hold on to it with fierce intensity, especially if what you wanted so desperately was a child. But Abraham was willing to let go of his son to follow what God asked of him because he knew with every ounce of his being that God was just and God kept the promises he made.

If we read this text without the same level of trust that Abraham had in God, then we run the risk of making God seem like a cosmic bully. To ask an old man to sacrifice the child he'd waited for for so long, the child that proved that God keeps God's promises, even if it was only a test, is a horrible thing to do. But that's not really what was happening. I don't believe for a second that God would ever ask any of us to sacrifice the life of someone we loved, and if we read this passage without trusting that fully, we turn God into a tyrant who asks unreasonable things of people wholly reliant on his love. God is no tyrant, however, so there's obviously more to this story than an unreasonable request as part of some unnecessary supernatural test of obedience. The interaction between God, Abraham, and Isaac comes down to fear and trust. Will we allow the fear of losing something we cherish stand in the way of trusting in what God has promised? Will we allow fear to divide us from the unity given to us when God sacrificed his son so we wouldn't need to be afraid anymore? Will we allow fear to control our lives, or will we allow ourselves to trust in God's love?

I said earlier that I don't believe that God would ever require us to sacrifice someone we love, and that remains to be true, however, if we are too afraid to lose someone we love because the weight of what God does ask of us is too great, then we've already lost them. God does not make unreasonable requests of us, but God does demand that we live into the love and justice Christ showed us. Jesus said as much time and time again. We heard it just last week in Matthew 10 when Jesus said,

“Those who love father or mother more than me aren’t worthy of me. Those who love son or daughter more than me aren’t worthy of me. Those who don’t pick up their crosses and follow me aren’t worthy of me. Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me will find them.” This is a difficult and weighty proposition, because we’re hardwired for self-preservation. We’re hardwired to seek to protect those we care about more than those we don’t know. It’s no secret that for the vast majority of humanity, we simply won’t care about injustice unless we experience it ourselves, or know someone personally who has. God’s call, and Christ’s call, is for us to move beyond our self-centeredness and work for justice for all people. German theologian and pastor Martin Niemöller famously talked and wrote about his own conversion of thought from overtly supporting the rise of Adolf Hitler to being one of the founding members of the German confessing church, which opposed the Nazi takeover of the church. The actions that got him to rethink his beliefs were the roundups of Christians in Germany who were of Jewish descent. Before that time, and his subsequent imprisonment in the concentration camp at Dachau, Niemöller was known to have made anti-Semitic statements of his own. But as he saw the dismantling of everything he held dear, he realized he had been wrong. Later in his life he walked back his statements and spoke openly of his guilt, and of the church’s guilt, in the rise of Nazism. He also famously penned the poem that has been widely shared, especially at Holocaust memorials, called “First They Came.” I’m sure you’ve heard or read one of the many versions of it - “First they came for the trade unionists but I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist, then they came for the communists but I did not speak out because I was not a communist, then they came for the Jews but I did not speak out because I was not a Jew, then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me.” It’s a reminder that when we don’t speak up against injustice for anyone, then we are refusing justice for even ourselves. Speaking up for the love and justice of our creator carries risks, and could even cost us our lives, but if we’re not willing to lose our lives for God’s justice, then we’ve already lost them.

When God called on Abraham, before he even knew what was going to be asked of him, he simply said, “I’m here.” When Abraham walked his son to the place of sacrifice, Isaac saw there was no animal to be found and so he called out to his father and again Abraham said, “I’m here.” When Abraham had his arm outstretched with his hand clutching a knife, ready to plunge it into Isaac’s helpless body, God called out and again Abraham said, “I’m here.” When fear could have gotten the better of him, Abraham remained present, waiting for God, trusting in God, and God showed up. Abraham was willing to lose his life and all that he held dear, but he trusted that God had made a promise and God wouldn’t fail. There was never any real danger, and Abraham knew it because he trusted. We face the same test every day of our lives. Our test doesn’t come in the shape of having to choose to sacrifice a child or not. Our test comes in how we respond to the injustices around us. Are we willing to sacrifice our

livelihoods to speak against ageism, sexism, racism, or xenophobia? Are we willing to take difficult stands knowing it could cost us our friendships? Are we willing to invest everything we have and everything we are to rebuild our community based on the love and justice of God? Will we succumb to fear, or will we trust? When God calls out to us, before we know what God wants of us, are we willing to say, "I'm here?" Are we willing to remain present even if it looks like we might lose everything we love? If the answer is no, then you've already lost it. Living into and trusting in God's justice is not an unreasonable request. God's justice is the framework of the Kingdom that Christ died to bring us. If we're not willing to lose ourselves for the sake of the Kingdom, then we're not willing to say that we believe Christ's death brought us life. We can't profess faith in Christ and then turn our backs on those who suffer, they're incompatible. It comes down to fear or trust. May we have the courage to choose trust, because it's in trust that we find life. Amen.