

**A Test of Faith**  
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

**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, 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.'

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I have had several church members over the years confess to me, “I don’t like reading the Old Testament. The God of the Old Testament seems so bloody and vengeful. It is hard to believe in that kind of God.” I have to admit—they have a good point. In the beginning, God creates a wonderful world, only to later flood it and destroy all living things except the residents of a sturdy ark. The prophets warn people that their sinful ways will summon God’s wrath. In the Old Testament, God seems quick to bless, and double-quick to smite if angered.

The Old (also called the First) testament also testifies to God’s abounding love, and deep concern for the oppressed. Like with any Bible study, reading the Old/First testament requires not only an open heart, but also a curious mind.

We have been preaching our way through the book of Genesis, and every week presents a new twist in our family tree. God chose our ancestors Abraham and Sarah for a great covenant, and promised them offspring, land, and many descendants. And, through the birth of Isaac, God’s promise is fulfilled. In today’s reading from Genesis, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, and at once, this request sounds cold and cruel. What kind of God gives a couple a long-hoped for child, only to take it away? At the last moment, Abraham’s hand is stayed and Isaac is spared. The life of his son intact, and God now appears as a divine sadist, not unlike the Roman gods who often played with mortal lives for their own perverse entertainment.

So here we are, with yet another troubling story added to our family tree, but this one is the climax of all the stories involving Abraham and his family.<sup>1</sup> Abraham is a multi-faceted human being, capable of courageous and cowardly acts. “In Genesis 12:4, Abraham responds to God without hesitation, packing up and going

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to the land that God would show him. At other times, however, Abraham acts in ways that suggest doubt. Twice, out of fear, he tries to pass off his wife as his sister and Sarah ends up in the bedroom of the local ruler (Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-18). So worried about producing an heir, he has relations with a woman other than his wife (albeit at Sarah's bidding). He laughs when God tells him that Sarah would bear a child and that she would become the mother of nations (Gen. 17:17). Throughout, there are indications that Abraham still doesn't quite trust God to accomplish what he promised, or believe that God is a god of his word.

So God asks Abraham to demonstrate his faith by trusting God with his hopes, his future, his deepest longings, his only son whom he loves. Genesis 22:1 describes it as a test, signaling to the reader that God had no intention of going through with it. The messenger of the Lord stays Abraham's hand, preventing him from killing his son. God never wanted child sacrifice after all. Rather, he wanted Abraham to face his own conflicted and divided loyalties."<sup>2</sup>

Let me state for the record that God does not demand proof from us that we are faithful. However, God desires **we** remove idols and other barriers that would prevent us from possessing complete faith. I whole-heartedly and emphatically renounce any doctrine that states that God sends suffering to test our faith. The abundance God promises is always life-giving and life-sustaining. But our faith is tested, often on a daily basis. The current pandemic, combined with economic uncertainty, and anxiety about the future of the church has many of us wondering if God is judging or even punishing us. A more helpful reframe would be, how do we, as followers of Jesus, respond faithfully when circumstances shake the status quo? What are the divided loyalties we entertain each day?

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4500](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4500)

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This summer, our society is juggling the divided loyalties of a justice and economic system that benefits white americans at the expense of americans of color. Loyalty to the self competes with solidarity with our Black neighbors. As a white person, I struggle with how to respond; and as a faith leader, I worry about “rocking the boat.” God is not testing our faith, but our faith is being tested—do we trust that the church and society can exist and flourish when it embraces racial equality at every level? What will need to be sacrificed?

In our justice work at Trinity, we often recall Micah 6:8 as our reminder that the Lord requires us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. We don’t often read the two verse that come before:

<sup>6</sup> ‘With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?

Shall I come before the Holy One with burnt-offerings,  
with calves a year old?

<sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ [Micah 6: 6-7]

We do not prove our faith to God, rather, we act with the assumption that God always provides, and provides in abundance. Abundance is the bedrock of justice. This week, Topeka passed its tenth homicide for the year. There is, sadly, an abundance of gun violence in our community. That means that JUMP also pursues an abundance of justice, with the goal of eradicating gun violence so that one day there will no more children and youth sacrificed on an altar of fear.

As one commentary observes, “Something changes between Abraham and God that day. Abraham learns to trust and fear God. And God proves that God can be trusted. In the history of God’s relationship with human beings, God would

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demonstrate this time and again. In the end, God's commitment to fulfilling his promises to Abraham and bringing about his redemptive purposes would end up costing God dearly. For while Abraham's son is spared, God would give his own son to up to death. This too was an act of provision on God's part—a provision that would ultimately fulfill what God started in Abraham, that is, the restoration of blessing to the nations and to the world.”<sup>3</sup>

As we will sing later in the service,

**Your faithfulness, O Lord, is sure  
in all your words, your gracious deeds;  
you gently lift all burdened souls  
and well provide for all our needs.**

**Amen.**

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4500](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4500)