The Big Test

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 22:1-10
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This sermon is for those of us who are living a life we never could have imagined. This message is for any of us who are living a different kind of life than the one we had planned. If this description fits with your life, Abraham’s story is written expressly for you.

Abraham lived a long time ago, 4014 years to be exact. He was the 10th generation descendant of Noah. Yes, that Noah who built the ark! Abraham lived with his wife, Sarah, in a city called Ur in what is present day Iraq.

God told Abraham, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). Abraham seems to be minding his own business when God calls—Abraham, this is what I want you to do.

God’s command comes with a host of promises: “I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, I will bless those who bless you and all people on earth will be blessed by you” (Genesis 12:2-3). The command of this is what I want you to do is matched with promises of what God will make happen.

Abraham and Sarah do as they are told. They leave their homeland and travel to Haran, a distance of 600 miles. Six hundred miles is like walking from DC to Chicago.

There are times when Abraham struggles to believe God’s promises and takes matters into his own hands. Like the time he travels to Egypt, only to have the Pharaoh take an interest in Sarah and seeks to add her to his harem. Abraham fails to stick up for Sarah, passing her off as his sister to protect his self-interests (12:12-13).

When the promise of a son doesn’t happen fast enough, Abraham conspires to conceive a child with Sarah’s handmaid Hagar (16:1-2). Take my word for it; this only complicates an already messy situation.

When God visits Abraham on the eve of his 100th birthday to reiterate the promise, Abraham can’t help himself. He falls down laughing at the prospect (17:17).
Well, what do you know! Twenty-five years later, Sarah gives birth to this miraculous child of promise. God assumes naming rights. His name will be Isaac, meaning laughter. Apparently, God will have the last laugh on this one.

Now our story has a happily-ever-after ending. Not quite! There is this little matter of “the test.” Abraham doesn’t know it to be a test; only we readers are told the plan. If Abraham will be the father of many nations, God wants to know that he can go the distance.

God says, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and go to Moriah to sacrifice him as a burnt offering” (22:2). You must be joking!

Child sacrifice was practiced among the Canaanite religions where Abraham lived. Yet the Torah is clear—God abhors child sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31).

It’s odd that Abraham doesn’t question God’s bizarre request. It was only a few chapters earlier that Abraham goes toe-to-toe with God concerning His judgment over Sodom. Why would Abraham intercede for Sodom but not his son? We’ll never know. We’re only told they travel three days to their destination. A penny for your thoughts, Abraham!

They arrive at Mt. Moriah and Isaac asks the logical question, “Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering” (22:7). Surely Abraham answers with a lump in his throat, “The Lord will provide” (22:8).

Painstakingly, Abraham stacks the wood and binds Isaac on the altar. He draws a knife to do the unthinkable. A voice penetrates the stillness, “Abraham, Abraham, do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him; now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld your son, your only son” (22:12).
You can exhale now. Abraham has passed the test with flying colors. He is a worthy candidate to become father of Israel.

This is a difficult story. It’s not a cotton candy story that goes down easy. Why would God ask Abraham to do something so outrageous?

Here’s my theory: I suspect Isaac has become too important to Abraham. After waiting 25 years for the birth of their son, it’s little wonder that Abraham and Sarah worship the ground Isaac walks on.

It’s normal for parents to identify with their children. Some parents take it too far and over-identify with their children. We become so invested in our children’s grades and sports that we unconsciously try to manipulate them. We vicariously live out our hopes and dreams through our children.

What is your Isaac? What has taken on exaggerated importance in your life? Is it your children, your home, your appearance, your career, your friends?

Abraham comes, in this story, to the place in his life where he is willing to let go of Isaac and trust his future to God. When Isaac asks about the lamb used in the sacrifice, all that Abraham knows to say is “Jehovah Jireh”—the Lord will provide. Later, when God provides a ram for the sacrifice, Abraham renames the mountain “the Lord will provide.” While before God is the tester, now God is the provider.

That’s why Abraham is remembered as the father of the faithful. He’s willing to let go of the future he had planned out for himself. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that Abraham became “fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised” (4:21).

Let me go back to the way I began this sermon. The story of Abraham is for any who are living a life you never could have expected. You’re not doing the job you had hoped to be performing. Your marriage or friendship haven’t exactly turned out in the way you imagined.
Let Abraham’s story speak into your life. Let go of the life you want to live and start living the life you have been given.

We want life on our terms. We want a predictable life. We want our domesticated God to suit our agenda. We don’t want God to make demands of us. We don’t want God to ask us to give up anything of importance. We want a safe God in keeping with our safe world.

God is not always predictable. God’s ways are not our ways. As his story bears witness, Abraham’s God is not for the risk-averse.

Abraham’s life is proof-positive that God keeps promises. Hang onto the promises. God prevails in our lives when life looks the bleakest.

Some people rail against this story. They regard it as a form of divine child abuse. Why would God ask Abraham to do something immoral even if He doesn’t intend Abraham to carry it out?

The story can be classified as a typology. When events in the Old Testament foreshadow stories in the New Testament it’s called a typology. We could say that Isaac is a type of Christ. Isaac submits to his father’s will as Jesus submits to his Father’s will. Isaac bears the wood as Christ bears his cross. Isaac is laid on the altar as Jesus is nailed to the cross. The ram that is offered in the place of Isaac could be likened to Christ offered in the place of sinners. Isaac is rescued after a three-day journey just as Jesus is raised after three days in the belly of the earth. This would explain why this story is read as part of the Easter story each year.

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther and his wife, Katherine, made it a daily practice to read Scripture to each other. Martin happened to be reading to Katy the story of Abraham’s being asked to sacrifice his only son to God. Katy asked, “How would a loving God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son?” Martin answered, “He did it Himself. God did sacrifice His only son for us.”
God never asks us to do anything He is unwilling to do Himself. God provides a surrogate for Isaac just as God provides a surrogate for us in Jesus Christ. God is willing to sacrifice what is most precious to Him, namely His one and only beloved son, for you and me.

My dream is that God will use *The Story* this fall to renew our lives and church. God is writing His story in the world. He wants you to play a role in telling His story.

This summer, as we preached our way through the Minor Prophets, I was struck by something Habakkuk prays, “Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day; in our time make them known” (3:2).

Is your heart warm to the things of God? Nearly 1600 years ago, St. Augustine wrote, “Give me a man who loves; give me one who yearns; give me one who is hungry; give me one far away in the desert, who is thirsty ... Give me that sort of man; he knows what I mean. But if I speak to a cold man, he will never understand.”

Jonathan Edwards observed that any true revival will give rise to two groups of people: the resisters and the responders. The resisters are those who constantly examine the motives of everybody else. The responders are those who constantly examine and scrutinize their own motives.

I’m inviting you to become a responder. Read *The Story*. Live into the story. Let your story become part of God’s big story.