

“God tested Abraham” Those three words introduce one of the most hair-raising passages from the Old or New Testaments. “God tested Abraham” We know what comes next but even so if we take this one phrase at a time it is a white-knuckle experience. There’s not much preamble here. God says to Abraham “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 mountain that I shall show you.” God had first called Abraham when he was 75 years old and Abraham had been following God’s directives for his life for at least 25 years before Isaac was born. Abraham is an old man now and he finally has the heir that God had promised to him. He loved this son, this son who is now truly his only son because just last week we read how Abraham had exiled Hagar and Ishmael to their fates in the wilderness of Beersheba. Granted Abraham had been reluctant to do so and had only acquiesced after God had reassured him that he would make a nation of Ishmael.

Isaac, the child of the promise was his heir, and now this. Remember too that Isaac was beloved by Sarah who had been barren throughout her long marriage to Abraham. Isaac’s birth had brought Sarah joy and laughter. And now this. We don’t know whether or not Abraham told Sarah where he was going or why we just know that Abraham has obeyed God’s command without question.

Why would God do this to Abraham, what kind of a god would demand the sacrifice of a child? When we read or hear about examples of child abuse we often wonder why God would let this happen let alone command that it be done. Although child sacrifice was not unknown in ancient Israel it was frowned upon and was practiced more commonly by the Canaanites to the disgust of the Israelites so this is an extraordinary command on so many levels. Yet Abraham doesn’t bat an eye and prepares to make the journey to do as the Lord has commanded?

What do you imagine that Abraham was thinking during the three day journey to Moriah, each day bringing him closer to this unconscionable deed? Was he devastated? Was he angry with God? Was he fearful about how Sarah would react when he returned without the boy? We don’t know any of those things. Psychological speculation/reflection is not a characteristic of most biblical characters so it is not surprising that we just get the bare facts.

We even have to wonder what Isaac thought of the proceedings, right up to being bound on the altar. Ancient commentaries on this passage explore many avenues in trying to understand the whys and wherefores of God’s request and that is where we can miss the boat if we allow ourselves to try to reason things out. God’s ways are not our ways.

God is testing Abraham and we should just breathe a sigh of relief that God does not test us in this manner. One of the suggested passages from our burial service includes this line from Lamentations *“Although [God] causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love;*

³³ *for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.* (Lam 3:32-33 NRS) To be sure we can look at any of the trials and challenges of our lives as some kind of a test but these are not of God, although they may provide an opportunity to explore how to respond with faith.

But God is testing Abraham. Abraham has been mostly faithful although some of his interactions might rate him a B- rather than an A. Several times he tried to second guess God and needed to be corrected and/or rescued. God has, however, placed God's plan of salvation in Abraham's hands, and God needs to be sure that Abraham will get it right. Truthfully I am confident that God would manage to reframe anything that Abraham didn't get right so I think it has more to do with Abraham demonstrating his trust in God that no matter what God commanded all would be well. One commentator suggested that it was God's faith that was being tested – hearkening back to the book of Job when God permits Satan to test Job. (NIB Vol1 pg 497) As I have said Abraham doesn't flinch when asked to begin the journey, he is confident that "God himself will provide the burnt offering" when the time comes, and he takes the knife to kill his son. Abraham does not hold back. The angel of the Lord has to intervene. Abraham has been faithful. We the audience breathe a sigh of relief as we hear God affirm Abraham's demonstration of faith. Isaac seems none the worse for wear, he has trusted his father.

We learn from this passage that God demands our best, God demands that we give over our lives, those things that we love most so that God can work with them and us for our own good. The last several weeks we have heard in the gospel of Matthew about the challenges and sacrifices that disciples are called to make as they respond to Jesus. Jesus told them to go out into the world without money or luggage, to trust that in the event of public persecution the Holy Spirit would give them the right words. Jesus warned then that he did not come to bring peace that following him could lead to conflict, even with the members of their own families. These are scary examples if we bring them forward to our own lives.

One way we can look at this is through the lens of justification and sanctification which we hear in our passage from Romans.

According to Paul we have been freed from sin, i.e. made righteous in order to pursue sanctification, the process of growing deeper and deeper into Christ. There's no guarantee that this will happen, each time that we are faced with a choice we can move closer to God or further away from God. No, it's not quite that simple but the exercise of our free will, the exercise of our free will in subjecting ourselves to God is our own testing. I suggest too that the emphasis on testing is less about personally morality and more about furthering the work of the kingdom as disciples.

The tests of God have to do with how we expose the places in our hearts where we harbor prejudice, refuse to listen to those who are crying out in pain, ignore the needs of the vulnerable, and hide behind positions of power and privilege. Right now we are being tested by the Black Lives Matter protests. We are being tested to look past our discomfort at disorder and chaos, to listen to our history from a different perspective, and to hear the stories of those who have been hurt with open ears.

Abraham was tested to further God's plan that his descendants would be a light to the nations. We are tested to further the work of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and for which he died.

Today I believe that we are being called to stand against oppression and injustice in ways that may piss off those who are closest to us. It's a journey, nobody gets it right all at once – even Abraham. And there will be help along the way. Sometimes we will be the helpers welcoming prophets, or a supporting a righteous person, or even providing water to those who are thirsty and sometimes we will be welcomed and supported in return.

“The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Amen.