

May the Lord spare you an untested faith

Genesis 22:1-14

June 29, 2014

Some time later God tested Abraham ...

God tested Abraham? Why? Hasn't he been tested enough already?

Asked to leave home, family, everything that was familiar, to go to a new land that God would show him ...

Made a promise of many descendants, but waiting and waiting, waiting until he was a very old man before Isaac, the son of the promise, was born ...

Already having to give up one son, already losing Ishmael ...

Why test Abraham again?

God called to him, "Abraham!" And Abraham answered, "Yes, here I am!"

Here I am? Would you be that quick to answer? If, when, God calls your name, will you say, "Here I am?" Or will you pretend you didn't hear, and hope God moves on to somebody else?

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love so much ..."

Isaac was Abraham's only son, because his first son, Ishmael, was gone. It was Abraham himself who sent Ishmael away. Abraham had already lost one son ... by his own hand.

"Take your son," God said, "your only son, Isaac, whom you love so much, and go to the land of Moriah. There on a mountain that I will show you, offer him as a sacrifice to me."

Early the next morning Abraham cut some wood for the sacrifice, loaded his donkey, and took Isaac and two servants with him. They started out for the place that God had told him about ...

Early the next morning? But what about the night? What about that long and terrible night? What was Abraham thinking? What was Abraham feeling? That's what we want to know! What's going on in Abraham's mind? What's going on in Abraham's heart? But the Genesis storyteller doesn't care. It's not important. It doesn't matter. All that matters is this: Abraham went.

On the third day Abraham saw the place in the distance. Then he said to the servants, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there and worship, and then we will come back to you."

Abraham made Isaac carry the wood for the sacrifice, and he himself carried a knife and live coals for starting the fire. As they walked along together, Isaac spoke up, "Father!"

He answered, "Yes, my son?"

Isaac asked, "I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide one."

This is what Abraham believes. God will provide one. Does Abraham believe that God will require Isaac? No. Abraham believes that God will not require Isaac. Abraham believes that God will provide a lamb for the sacrifice.

And the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place which God had told him about, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he picked up the knife ...

I can't bear to read it! Can you bear to hear it? It is an unbearable, an unthinkable, horror. It was unbearable, unthinkable, for Hagar to have to watch her son die, but to have to watch your son die ... by your own hand?

Abraham, Abraham!

Yes, here I am ...

[And the angel of the Lord said to Abraham,] "Don't hurt the boy or do anything to him. Now I know that you honor and obey God, because you have not kept back your only son from him."

Abraham looked around and saw a ram caught in a bush by its horns. He went and got it and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. Abraham named that place "The Lord Provides." And even today people say, "On the Lord's mountain he provides."

Why does God test Abraham? For God's own sake? Or for Abraham's? Because God needs to know how deep Abraham's loyalty goes? Or because Abraham needs to know how deep his trust in God really is?

Would it have been better -- better for Abraham, better for us too trying to be believers -- would it have been better if this had never happened, if God had not tested Abraham? What would be missing, would anything be lacking, if Abraham had never been asked to take his son to the land of Moriah?

And why is it that this story, this terrifying and bewildering story, comes at the climax of the Abraham story cycle? Why does the Genesis storyteller think we need to know this, above all else we need to know this, about Abraham?

The answers to these questions matter, because they concern us, not just Abraham. Should we expect that God will test us too?

Should you expect that God will test you? Do you "want" to be tested, like Abraham? (Who could ever want to be tested like Abraham?!) Or would you rather that your faith, your simple and unquestioning trust in God, be left untried, unchallenged, untested?

Abraham's story is Israel's story. He is Father Abraham, the progenitor of the Hebrew race, the root of the nation of Israel. His call is Israel's call: "You will become a great nation" ... "I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing" ... "Through you I will bless all the nations." His promise is Israel's promise, a promise made to them, but much bigger than them. It is for Ishmael, too. It is for all the nations, too.

This is the context in which we should hear this story, the context of Abraham's call and God's promise, the context of what God intends for and by the people God calls to be his own. They are called for the sake of the other. They are called to be God's own so that all people will be God's own. They are called to be a witness people, a servant people, servants of God and of the rest of humanity, even to the point of sacrifice.

*He endured the suffering that should have been ours,
the pain that we should have borne ...
All of us were like sheep that were lost,
each of us going his own way.
But the Lord made the punishment fall on him,
the punishment all of us deserved.*

“All of us” are all of us! We, the nations, are lost, but the punishment, the burden, the test, falls on him, on the Lord’s servant. On Abraham. On Israel. On Jesus.

And so Abraham is tested, and so Israel is tested, so the Lord will know (or is it so they will know?) that they are the Lord’s servant, that they are the Lord’s faithful witness.

How deep is Abraham’s trust in God? Deep enough that even when circumstances indicate otherwise, even when the promise seems most in doubt, even when God himself seems strange and alien and forbidding, Abraham believes. Abraham believes that God will provide.

How deep is Israel’s faith in God? Deep enough so that even when circumstances indicate otherwise, even when their nation has been ravaged by a foreign power, even when they are forced to live far from home in exile, they believe still? They still believe that God will provide?

How deep is Jesus’ faith in God? Deep enough so that even when God seems entirely absent -- “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” -- Jesus believes. Jesus believes that God will provide.

How deep is your faith in God?

Do you believe that God will provide? Even when circumstances indicate otherwise? Especially when circumstances indicate otherwise? Even when God seems absent. Even when the world seems to be spinning out of control, even out of God’s control, toward some kind of awful end?

Will we be God’s witness people? Will we be God’s servant people? Will we be the means by which the nations of the world are blessed? Because we believe God will provide. Because we believe God will not fail to keep the promise. Because we will not give up or give in or turn back. Because we will not not believe.

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It is hard for me to say that I want that for you. We do pray otherwise every Sunday: “Lead us not into temptation” ... “Do not bring us to the test.”

And yet, a faith that is untested, a faith that is easy, comfortable, convenient, useful, unthreatening ...

What real substance does a faith have that doesn't make you choose? What real substance does a faith have that doesn't make you change? What real substance does a faith have that doesn't require from you any kind of sacrifice? What real substance does a faith have that has never been tested?

You say that you believe in God?

Say it now and say it again when the darkness comes ...

Say it now and say it again when your body aches and say it again when your spirit aches ...

Say it now and say it again when people fail you and say it again when you fail ...

Say it now and say it again when the sky is falling and say it again when you are falling ...

Say it now and say it always, whatever the time, whatever the place, whatever the circumstances, whatever your lot ...

Because it is so. God will provide!