

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland  
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I'll be the first to admit that I've struggled and wrestled with this scripture this week. I've had a tough time with this scripture for several reasons. The least of which is, as a father, I cannot fathom the thought of sacrificing my child, whether or not God asked me to. I cannot conceive of even entertaining that notion. Initially, on first reading, Abraham's willingness bothered me. I distinctly remembered asking myself, "What's the good news here?"

Another reason why it's giving me trouble is a question that a commentator posited: Is the God who would ask you to sacrifice your own child worthy of devotion? Or to say it another way, what does this story say about God? Who God is, what God desires, or wants, and how God acts.

This has been a 'difficult' passage to work with.

So what are we to do? I take a certain degree of comfort in knowing that we are not the first people to be troubled by this passage. We are not the first people to wrestle with the meaning of this story and why it's included in our scripture. In fact, there are many such 'difficult' stories in scripture. And, like I wrote in my letter this week, avoiding them isn't going to be helpful. We do have to engage with these passages that we find 'tough.'

I think one of the biggest things we can do with a scripture passage such as this one is to have a look at the wider story of what's going on here. Reading it on its own, without the backstory, without the setting, without the larger picture, can get us into deep trouble. Context really matters with a tough passage like this. So here's the story so far:

Abraham is an important figure for three of the world's religions, often called the Abrahamic religions, which includes Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Abraham is a patriarchal figure in each of these religions, and we can trace our heritage, broadly, back to the Abraham story.

Abraham wasn't always Abraham; he was first known as Abram, and his story starts in Genesis 12. Abram is living in Haran, a city in southeastern Turkey in ancient Mesopotamia. It's here that Abram receives the call from God to leave his homeland. God promises Abram to make a great nation from him, so that he and his kin will be blessed and he will be a blessing to others.

And Abram listens and goes. God promises offspring to Abram; only two things make this promise too good to be true: first, Abram and his wife, Sarai, don't have any children. Second, they are not young sprouts anymore. Abram, when he receives this call from God, is 75 years old. It does sound a bit astonishing. Nonetheless, Abram heeds God's call and sets off, with his nephew Lot and his household.

Abram's journey is not straight, nor is it straightforward. And a journey such as Abram's is not without danger. However, God promises that God will be present, that God will see them through, and that God will lead and guide them.

A recurring theme that comes up in this journey is faith and trust. Does Abram have faith and trust in God to keep God's promise? God promises to make Abram the progenitor of a many people, but how can that be, when Abram has no children of his own? God promises to look after Abram on the way to Canaan, but how's God going to do that? More than once, as Abram and Sarai stop and approach some of the great cities along the way, scandalously enough, Abram passed Sarai off as his sister to local leaders, rather than his wife.

Now, is this some form of self-preservation or is it, as some scholars suggest that this is, perhaps Abram's way of taking matters into his own hands? If Sarai cannot conceive with him, perhaps some outside help is in order. Either way, Abram isn't giving us the most glowing example of faith and trust in God. In each case, Sarai is found out, and Abram and Sarai are sent on their way.

Over and over, God reaffirms the promise. Over and over, Abram tries to take matters into his own hands. Sarai goes so far as to offer Abram one of her handmaidens. In this last case, Hagar conceives, and Ishmael is born. But this is not the promised child for Abram and Sarai.

Twenty-five years after setting out God visits Sarai and Abram, now renamed, Abraham and Sarah, and reiterates the promise of them bearing a child, both Sarah and Abram scoff and laugh. They are now 99 years old, well past the age of having children, and even if they did, they would certainly be worthy of the name, geriatric parents. And lo, nine months later, Abraham and Sarah were the parents of an infant, Isaac. As the years go by, Isaac grows and matures into the young boy that we meet at the beginning of our scripture reading today.

Now, admittedly, I oversimplified about 10 chapters of Genesis in a couple of minutes, and I would encourage you to go back and read them, as a prelude for today's scripture.

Our reading for today is, in fact, quite matter-of-fact. There are a few things that we should take note of as we come back to read it. First, this is a **test**, it says so much from the outset. Our passage begins with “After these things, God tested Abraham.” So if this is a test, what kind of test is it? We can quickly lose sight of this as we get into the story, but it bears remembering that all that follows is a test of Abraham.

Is it a test of how well Abraham follows instructions? He, of course, hasn’t done the best job of doing that. Is it test, trusting that God will provide another son, after Abraham sacrifices this one? He waited 99 years for his first child, how long might the wait be this time? Or is it a test of something else?

It’s believed that it is a test of Abraham’s faithfulness, but not blind trust. When we take into account the last 10 chapters, essentially Abraham’s story since he left his homeland. We see a man who has gone back and forth with respect to his faithfulness. Yes, he believes God’s promises, but he still works to bring them about all by himself. Perhaps it’s a bit of that Russian Proverb, trust but verify; he trusts, but he also doesn’t at the same time.

He trusts that God will take care of him, and yet, he feels the need to pass Sarai off as his sister to ensure safety.

He trusts that God will provide an heir, and yet Abraham tries a number of different methods to conceive.

Abraham trusts, and at the same time, he doesn’t. So I wonder, how much of this ‘test’ is a test of his faithfulness?

How much is this a test of how much Abraham has grown in his faith since God first called him? It’s hard to know; Abraham doesn’t let us in on his thinking. From the outside looking in, it certainly appears that Abraham is going to follow God’s call to sacrifice Isaac to the letter.

We should note that at the time of this telling, in roughly the Middle Bronze Age, child sacrifice was a known practice in the Ancient Near East. Archaeological evidence from Carthage (a later Phoenician colony) suggests ritual child sacrifice did occur there, where urns with cremated remains of infants have been found. Scholars debate whether this was widespread or exceptional. In Canaan itself (Isaac’s region), it seems some groups did practice it, but again, it was not the daily religious norm—it was more of an extreme, high-stakes offering. Is this

what's happening in our story? Is Abraham following a known practice, albeit with his much older son?

The tension mounts as we read the story. Abraham has countless opportunities to confront God. To plead with God. When God told him to take his one son, the son whom he loves, Abraham could have said 'no', but he didn't. When they cut the wood for the sacrifice, he could have said 'no' and confronted God, but he didn't. When they got close to where the deed was to be done, he could have stopped, but he didn't. When he made Isaac carry the wood, he could have turned back, but he didn't. When Isaac asked him what was happening, he could have thought twice, but he didn't. When he built the altar, tied up Isaac, and laid him on the altar, he could have stopped, but he didn't. When he unsheathed the knife, he could have hesitated, but he didn't. He didn't stop until God told him to.

What was happening? As far as the story is told, Abraham believes that he's supposed to actually kill Isaac, his son, whom he's literally waited his entire life for. So, why does Abraham choose this instance to fully believe and trust God? Was Abraham acting out of his newly grown faith? Or did he think something else was going to happen?

Later biblical writers look at this passage through a bit of a different lens.

We read in the letter to the Hebrews, "By faith Abraham offered Isaac when he was tested. The one who received the promises was offering his only son. He had been told concerning him, *Your legitimate descendants will come from Isaac.*<sup>[a]</sup> He figured that God could even raise him from the dead. So in a way, he did receive him back from the dead." Perhaps this is a bit of revisionist history. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews sees this passage through the eyes of resurrection. Suggesting that two things occurred in this story, the first is that Isaac was as *good as dead* in Abraham's obedience, but was restored by God's intervention. And so God's intervention is, in some respects, a resurrection. Isaac was brought back to "life".

This sets up a couple of curious parallels between Jesus and Isaac. Insofar as both "died" and through God's intervention both were resurrected, but also both were innocent and were led to be sacrificed. Both carry the instruments of their death: Isaac, the wood for his pyre, and Jesus, the cross. Whether you track this line of thinking, I leave to you, but the parallels at the very least are curious, and the writer of Hebrews feels convinced of these similarities. According to Paul, Jesus was to be the last sacrifice needed.

So what's the 'good news' here, what's the 'gospel', what is significant about 'God's good story' in here? Certainly, it is that God does not condone human, and more specifically, child sacrifice. God does intercede, of course, God always intended to; let's not forget this was a test. God also provided an alternative, a substitute for Isaac's life. A ram caught in the thicket. Abraham sees the good news, as this last bit, that God provides. Not in some prosperity gospel way, but that God provides what is needed at the time, more like manna from heaven and what we pray when we pray "give us this day our daily bread..."

So I wonder, if maybe, at this point in his life, while it might appear that Abraham had steeled himself to perform one of the most heartbreaking rituals of his life, perhaps Abraham was trying to live into this hope and trust that God is at work, and at work for good. That, perhaps, he surrendered his will so that God had space to work. This is, perhaps, the ultimate act of faith, trusting that God can and will intercede.

This story, commonly called the Binding of Isaac, is a special story for both Jews and Christians alike. It's certainly not an easy story. And yet, It is a story of faith. It's a story of trust. As a people of faith, it's sometimes tough to walk in that faith and trust. Abraham, throughout his life, struggled with that. He trusted, but he also needed to do it his way, too. What does it mean for us to trust that God provides when it's needed? I don't think it's a matter of blind faith or blind trust. God did give us brains and free will after all, but there is an element of surrender. Holding things with an open hand, trusting that God is at work, and that God is at work for good. Perhaps that is the good news, the reassurance, the part of God's story for us to hold onto.

Amen

## **Sending Blessing**

And now,

May the God who calls into great acts  
of faith and trust,  
embolden you to follow.

May Jesus, who calls us to follow,  
inspire you to live into love,  
and May the Holy Spirit,  
provide you with all you need  
to surrender,

as you go in peace, to love and serve God.

Amen.