

“The LORD Will Provide”

There is no way around it: the account of God’s call to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac is a difficult story, perhaps one of the most troubling passages in the Bible. Often I try to begin a sermon with a joke or an amusing story, just to try to ease everybody into the subject matter. But there’s nothing funny here; and if you were paying any attention to the scripture reading, you have to be wondering what is going on.

Let’s get it out there: on the face of it, there are numerous elements about this passage that are shockingly offensive to modern sensibilities. I can list a few; you can probably think of more.

To begin with, there’s the characterization of God. God seems capricious and cruel, almost as though God is bored on a slow day and so for amusement decides to test Abraham. God comes across as an abusive parent who demands that Abraham be abusive, as well.

And isn’t Abraham scary in his apparent passivity, going along with something that just seems so wrong? It is frightening when people think God wants them to inflict cruelty on their children.

And speaking of children, notice how Isaac is treated as a non-entity in this story. His importance is entirely a function of his meaning in the ongoing story of God’s promises to Abraham. This also is creepy and disturbing.

So there’s no point in forced frivolity, or in pretending that this isn’t troublesome. What I propose to do is to walk us through the story, commenting as we go along, and then at the end to suggest why I think it is so important that we have this text in the Bible, because it speaks a profound—albeit difficult—truth about our life in faith. Here we go: remember the text is printed in your bulletin.

“After these things God tested Abraham...” Sounds a little bit like a mid-term. In fact, the story falls at a crucial point in the saga of the covenant between God and Abraham. Remember that the covenant centers on three promises God made: Abraham will be the father of a great nation, will inherit a promised land, and will be a vehicle through whom God will bring blessing to all the families of the earth. As we have seen, at one point that promise is in serious jeopardy because Abraham and his wife Sarah are unable to have children. But miraculously, in their old age, God grants to them the birth of a son, Isaac. He is their only child, and he is the sole link to the fulfillment of the promises.¹

Now this: God calls, “Abraham!” and Abraham answers, as always, “Here I am.” God says, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love...” Any argument that human life was cheap in these primitive times will not wash here; nor does the simplistic image of Abraham as an abusive father fit the text. Abraham loves his son.

¹ Last week we focused on the story of Ishmael, Abraham’s first born son conceived with Sarah’s servant, Hagar. Abraham also “sacrificed” Ishmael by sending him and his mother out into the wilderness after Isaac’s birth. See Genesis 17 and 21.

“... and go to the land of Moriah... on one of the mountains that I will show you”: The Hebrew word, “Moriah” means, “Yahweh [the proper name for God] provides.” That place name will be reinforced in verse 14. Traditionally, the site for this sacrifice is the hill in Jerusalem on which Solomon later built the great Temple. Today the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock are there. Also the traditional site from which the Prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven, it is an incredibly important place.

“... and offer him there as a burnt offering...”: could anything have prepared us for this? Human sacrifice, though not unheard of in the Ancient Near East, was never a part of Judaism. This is a stunning command.

Notice: there is no discussion, no protest, no debate. Neither is obedience an impulsive act on Abraham’s part: the journey requires preparation, and takes three days. Evidently the place to which they are going is either barren or unknown; they take their wood along with them. Isaac himself carries the wood for the last part of the trip.

As they journey, what are they thinking? As you might suspect, commentators have had a field day with this passage, imagining every possible (and a few impossible) psychological angles. There is so much silence here that the text almost demands speculation. But there is so little information that for now we need to resist temptation and try to stick to what we are told.

The exchange between Abraham and Isaac is poignant enough. “Father!” the boy cries. And good old Abraham answers as he always does, “Here I am...” His beloved son asks with the innocence of youth, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham’s response is, both structurally and theologically, the focal point of the passage: “God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

Some commentators argue that verse 8 makes it clear that Abraham *knows* that God won’t make him go through with this gruesome sacrifice, that God will provide an alternative.² But others suggest that Abraham’s deliberately ambiguous response means that Abraham himself does not know: “God will provide the lamb, my son...” and maybe it will be you. After all, it was God who provided Isaac in the first place.³ Either reading is permissible, I think.

This, interestingly enough, is the only recounted conversation between Abraham and Isaac. Whatever his frame of mind—and again, we can only speculate—Abraham proceeds to fulfill the command.

They arrive at the appointed place. Abraham builds an altar and lays out the wood Isaac has been carrying. Then he binds “his son Isaac” (notice the personal detail of repeating both the name and the relationship) and prepares to do the deed. But an angel (the word simply means “messenger”) of the LORD calls to Abraham: “Abraham! Abraham!” And he responds, as twice before, “Here I am.”

Notice that the name for God has changed. When we read simply the word “God,” as in verses 1,3,8 and 9, the Hebrew is *Elohim*. But when in English we encounter “the LORD” (notice the capital letters?) as a designation for God, the Hebrew is

² So maintains Terence Fretheim in his commentary on Genesis in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume I*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994. p.496.

³ This is more in keeping with Walter Brueggemann’s treatment in *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982. p.190 ff.

Yahweh, a different name. This name for God is important: scholars believe that different authors employed different names for God; so this may represent a place where two different strands of tradition are woven together. Notice that the LORD does not speak to Abraham directly, but through a messenger, who says, “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.”

Isn't that just a little bit peculiar: “... now I know that you fear God...”? Is this new information for God? Evidently it is. And on the strength of it, in verses 15-18 the threefold promise of descendants, land, and being a blessing to others, is repeated to Abraham.

A ram appears, caught by its horns. God did indeed provide the lamb for a burnt offering. Abraham offers it instead of his son. It is important that we not allow our modern sensibilities about animal sacrifice to enter at this point. God has delivered Abraham—not to mention Isaac!— from the harshness of the original command.

There is much more that could be said about this passage in the way of exegetical detail; but, in keeping with the spirit of mercy in which the story ends, let's not go into all of that.⁴

There is a quick and easy way to get this passage out of our minds: that is to argue that it is a simple morality tale designed to demonstrate that the LORD, *Yahweh*, in contrast to other deities of the Ancient Near East, does not require human sacrifice. While the point about sacrifice is well taken, the positioning of the story makes it evident that a far greater message is intended. We can't get off that easily!

Questions—first, about God, the question that won't wait: Why? Why such apparent cruelty from a God of love, a God who in Jesus' view numbers the hairs of our heads and cares for the humblest of creatures? How could God even think the unthinkable, and devise the sacrifice of Isaac as a test? We cannot answer this, but neither can we dismiss it simply as an Old Testament/New Testament thing: remember that the New Testament tells of the offering up of God's own son.

Does God simply never intend to make Abraham go through with it? Does God know from the outset what will happen here? Or does God learn something as the events unfold? Apparently so: for at the end the angel says, “... now I know that you fear God...” Does God still test people in this way? Is God still learning? What is the nature of this test which Abraham passes? Is God looking for blind, mindless obedience? Does God want to be certain of being more important to Abraham than whatever is in second place? In other words, is this an instance of God's jealousy? And what if Abraham had failed—what would have become of God's promises then?

Speaking of Abraham: what is going on with him all this time? Does he simply believe from the very beginning that God will never make him go through with sacrificing his son? If so, who is testing whom? Is Abraham simply involved in a high stakes game of chicken with God, and God blinks first? Elsewhere Abraham seems unafraid to contend with God, to argue, as in the defense of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:22-33). Why not argue here? “Here I am,” is all he says. How come? And what of the outcome for Abraham? At the end of the story, the messenger of God says

⁴ If you are interested, in addition to the above commentaries I recommend Soren Kierkegaard's masterful study in *Fear and Trembling*.

that, "... now I know that you fear God..." but what does Abraham know? Has this deepened his sense of God's graciousness? Or has it made him wonder what God will demand next? Has this strengthened Abraham's trust in God... or shattered it?

Any way we look at it, there are more questions than answers. The passage is difficult under any circumstances. But Walter Brueggemann offers a particularly provocative insight, observing that this passage requires us to hold in tension two realities about God. God tests; and God provides. Brueggemann argues that both are true and that either insight without the other is incomplete.

But to take Brueggemann a half-step further we might observe that God tests *in* providing, and God provides *in* testing.

God tests in providing because when we feel provided-for we find little need for faith. When we're cruising along and our lives feel complete and we're content, faith is likely to recede into the background. In times of great need we seek God; when crises recede we're content to be on our own. "There are no atheists in foxholes," is the way we put it. But there are a lot of armchair atheists. Prosperity is a major test of faith.

God also provides in testing. This part may seem more familiar. Certainly it has been true in my own life that times of greatest trial were also times when God was most present to me: not every moment and not necessarily in ways that made things easy; but in hindsight I could see ways in which I had been nurtured and sustained through trying times. Often these are intense periods of growth, when the concept of God with which we have been functioning proves too small for the circumstances in which we find ourselves. But it is in times of trial that the importance of faith comes home to us.

God tests in providing; and God provides in testing. The story holds these elements together in a tension that is excruciating and edifying.

Maybe the final word should belong to Earl Weaver, longtime manager of the Baltimore Orioles and nobody's model of perfect deportment. But Weaver had a homespun wisdom to him. One of his favorite sayings was, "You're never as good as you look when you're goin' good or as bad as you look when you're goin' bad." This seems to be to be true also in the life of faith. When things are going well and we're flying high, testing is never far away. When we've lost something terribly dear to us, God is never nearer. Both are true.

Trust in God, in good times and in bad, to give us not what we think we want, but what we most truly need.

Amen

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