

## Sermon: How Do I Sit with this Story? Part 2

Year A, Proper 8

[Genesis 22:1-14](#); [Psalm 13](#); [Romans 6:12-23](#); [Matthew 10:40-42](#)

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You hear this story and you wonder if Isaac ever spoke to Abraham again. Or if Sarah, after finding out where Abraham and Isaac had gone, every spoke to Abraham again. I wonder if I can follow a God who would test someone, anyone, in this way. How do I sit with this story? It's a story that is central to the Christian tradition, but it's so ugly. That God would ask, that Abraham would do and it would all end in a "just kidding." That may be overstating it a bit, but not much. So how do I sit with this story?

The story begins with God testing Abraham. Do I believe that God tests people? Yeah. I do. There have been a number of times where I had to step back and ask God if I was heading in a direction that God did not intend for me to go or was this one of those times where God was trying to teach me perseverance. Or was it one of those times when God was trying to teach me to reach out to others. I do believe God tests people.

Do I believe God would test Abraham? Abraham believed and left the land of his father. Abraham spoke with God, argued with God. But Abraham and Sarah persuaded themselves that when God said they would have a son, maybe God meant for them to find another woman to have Abraham's child. So they came up with Hagar, a slave, and she bore Ishmael. And when Sarah decided that Ishmael needed to be sent away, and Abraham was reluctant because he loved Ishmael, God told Abraham to go ahead and do as Sarah had asked. So first we see Abraham relying on his own resources, and then we see Abraham back way off and give Hagar and Ishmael a skin of water and a loaf of bread and send them off into the desert. So at times we see Abraham relying wholly on his own resources. At other times we see him relying completely on God. So I can see how Abraham doesn't have five stars in the faith section of Yelp.

In this story, we see him getting the balance about right. Abraham brings his own resources, the fire and the knife, the wood, the two servants, the donkey, and dear God, the child. Isaac asks him, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is lamb for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:7). Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." (Genesis 22:8) Abraham passes the test,<sup>1</sup> binding Isaac, laying him on the wood, reaching out his hand to the knife. God says, "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." (Genesis 22:12)

But do I want to believe that God would ask any father to kill his child? I don't. I don't want to follow a God who would ask that. That's where this story asks me to sit.

But here's the thing with this story. Do I want to believe that that ram appeared by accident, by nature or by good fortune?<sup>2</sup> No. I want to believe that ram appeared because Abraham was right, that God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering. I want to believe in the provision of God. What is more scandalous, more contrary to logic, more unreasonable? To believe in a sovereign God, who demands undivided loyalty and complete obedience? Or to believe in a gracious God

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 187.

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, 191

which provides good gifts? That is where the story is asking us to sit. With the reality that you have to have both. You don't get the provision without the test. When you follow the God of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac, you sign up for both.

Just about every week we sit in that place between test and provision without even noticing. Just about every week we ask God not to lead us into temptation. Just about every week we ask God for our daily bread. Just about every week we sit in this spot saying that God is the one who will decide if we are tested. Just about every week we sit in this spot saying that God is the one who provides what we need to continue to the next day.

But it doesn't feel like it does today, when we hear this story of the Sacrifice of Isaac. When we pray the Lord's Prayer how aware are we that we're saying, "Please don't put us to the test."? Because we're pretty sure that we're not going to pack up our child, our only child, whom we love (Genesis 22:2), and a knife and some wood and a fire and go to a mountain days away to sacrifice that child. That's a test we're going to fail. We're going to fail because we refuse to believe that God has the right to put us to that test. We're going to fail because we don't believe that God will truly provide what is needed by God's creature, us.<sup>3</sup> We're going to fail because we don't believe that the ram will be there.

Today, it feels like it does when we read about that night in the garden at Gethsemane, when Jesus says, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." (Mark 14:36) What is God's response to the crucifixion? The resurrection. Test and provision.

Today's story of Abraham and Isaac is a resurrection story. Not in the sense that Isaac dies and is reborn, because the text doesn't say that. Not in the sense that Isaac would have been resurrected if he had been killed, because the text doesn't say that either.<sup>4</sup> But because Abraham knows beyond understanding that God will find a way to bring life even in this scenario of death.<sup>5</sup> Resurrection is the miracle by which God provides new life in a situation where only death is anticipated.<sup>6</sup> Resurrection concerns the keeping of a promise where there is no ground for it.<sup>7</sup>

That is the place where we sit. Our God is not logical, reasonable, predictable. We belong to our God, our God does not belong to us.<sup>8</sup> We don't get to decide the tests, we don't get to decide who gets tested. And we don't have the imagination to decide what gets provided or to whom. This story of Abraham and Isaac is an uncomfortable story to sit with. Because it strips away all the world-as-we-know-it and leaves us in the lap of God's kingdom.

While it is an uncomfortable place to sit, notice this. In the Gethsemane story, Jesus is proved faithful. In today's story, Abraham is proved faithful. Notice that in both stories, God tests and tests hard. We pray that we are never tested so hard. Notice that in both stories, God provides

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 191.

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, 193.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 193.

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, 194.

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, 193.

<sup>8</sup> Nibs Stroupe, "Proper 8, Pastoral Perspective, Genesis 22:1-14" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 1.

and provides beyond possible expectation. We pray that we are always so provided for. Notice that in both stories, God is proved faithful as well.<sup>9</sup> Whatever else, we follow a faithful God.

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<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, 194.