

“The God who provides: A ram in the thicket”

Genesis 22:1-14

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This story is known as the *Akedah* in Hebrew. *Akedah* means binding, and it is named this because Isaac is bound by Abraham and placed on the altar of sacrifice. Knowing the level of human energy this story evokes, we realize even the act of listening binds us up. How could Abraham obey such a command? How could Isaac submit to such a command? And perhaps most troubling, how could God give such a command. Listen to this story, and we become bound up in a powerful scripture that causes us to examine deep questions of faith.

One theologian examines this text as it relates to being vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> We can understand how Isaac is vulnerable. Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb? Soon Isaac will be bound and placed on the altar. He makes not even a murmur of protest. He is completely at the mercy of his father.

Abraham is vulnerable, in that he is bound to God and bound to his son. He seemingly has to choose between his God and his son, his only son, whom he loves. We can only imagine the great anguish involved because again the scriptures do not give voice to his struggle.

Our hearts go out to Abraham and Isaac, for we sense how vulnerable they are as they approach Mount Moriah. But the theologian insists God is also vulnerable in this narrative. How so?

The scripture begins with these words, “Some time later...” Another translation says, “After these things...” When God tests Abraham, it is later, it is after these things. These things began with Abraham back in Genesis 12. These things involved the promise of blessing and the provision of both a land and ancestors to fill the land. The promise narrowed and became exceedingly specific, that Abraham would have a son, that the son would be born by Sarah, and eventually, that all these things would happen within one year’s time. It is after all these things, after God has walked faithfully with Abraham 25 years plus however many Isaac has been alive, that God tests Abraham. When will God learn?

And apparently, there is something big riding on this test. There is something God needs to know. Does Abraham trust God? After all these things, will this relationship with Abraham stand the test, or will it fail?

Oh yes, God is vulnerable. When the scripture says, “After all these things,” it might even mean more than God’s journey with Abraham. After all these things could take us back to a garden, a man, and a woman. God tested Adam and Eve. After God provided everything, and I mean everything their hearts could desire, God set a limit. You may eat of any tree but one. The first man, the first woman, the first test, and the first failure. It would not be the last man, the last woman, the last test, or sadly, the last failure.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Davis, “Vulnerability, the Condition of Covenant, in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Ellen Davis and Richard Hays) 237.

In the garden God commanded for humans to be keepers. But outside the garden, Cain failed the test. He killed his brother Abel, and as the ground cried out, Cain's weak defense was to plead ignorance. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The rebellion which led to the flood and the arrogance that built the tower of Babel in an effort to be equal to God might well have convinced God there would never be obedience or trust.

But here is God, after all these things, testing, testing to see if there will be one, even one, who will trust. Is God vulnerable in this text? When God saw the rebellion in the days of Noah, the scriptures say God was grieved. A God who is grieved by disobedience and lack of trust sets himself up for failure once again. God tests Abraham.

The depth of God's vulnerability is deepened when we consider the central affirmation in the passage, which is that the Lord will provide. Karl Barth is credited with explaining provide from its Latin roots, which is *pro video*.<sup>2</sup> Literally, God sees ahead. Abraham answers Isaac with all that he knows, and with all that he believes. "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham simply says, "The Lord will see ahead." The Lord will provide. When the huge sigh of relief is expelled and the beloved child unbound, Abraham looks at the ram in the bush and says, "The Lord will see ahead." The Lord will provide. Shoot, they even name the place after this incredible truth, *Jehovah Jireh*. The Lord will see ahead.

And yet as wonderful as this truth is, what pain lies ahead for God. If the Lord sees ahead, will he see a mountain where God's holy words are being given to Moses while God's people, the very ones he has delivered from slavery and bondage and led in the wilderness are turning from him and worshiping a golden calf? If the Lord sees ahead will he see a people settled in the Promised Land who have looked at all their blessing and said, "This is the work of our own hands and the fruit of our labors"? If the Lord looks ahead will he see a people who turn from him so often he finally finds a fitting metaphor for the relationship of God and humans, that of harlotry. Does God see ahead to that bitter day when he will say to Hosea, "Take a prostitute for your wife," for God has been rejected by the very people he loves. God has been betrayed by Israel, a people who have gone after other lovers.

When we say God sees ahead, it does not remove God from the drama of this story. Rather, it cements in our minds, and in our hearts, that God is intimately bound up with a particular people, a people known as Israel. In this binding together of a God and his people, all parties are vulnerable. Each party has gone all in. Nothing is held back.

So here in this story filled through and through with vulnerability, God tests Abraham. "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt sacrifice." If we know the God who is vulnerable, who is willing to see ahead and provide for his people through countless trials and tribulations, then maybe we can trust God as he puts Abraham to the test. Interestingly enough, that is what numerous biblical scholars have done with this text. Of all the thousands of commentaries and sermons on this subject, apparently not one has taken this test and tried to make it a fixed pattern for how God relates to his people. Not one commentator has taken this passage and jumped

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (in the Interpretation series) 191.

to the conclusion God calls his people to sacrifice their children.<sup>3</sup> That is not who God is, and that is not what God desires. We know that is true because when a story hits our papers like the one this week about the father who in all likelihood murdered his two children, we not only suffer broken hearts, we believe God shares in the pain of this terrible tragedy. God tests Abraham, but it is a test that emanates from a God who has made his heart vulnerable to his people. God is bound to Abraham and Isaac. There is something in this test which can take faith to a deeper and more profound level.

Yes, it is difficult to hear God say, “Take your son...” We want a God who loves the children, who protects the children, and who defends the children. We want a God who loves children at least as much as we do.

As I prepared for this sermon, I thought of how many times I have criticized God for saying those difficult words, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love.” I criticized God because we all know how important it is to love children and provide for them.

And then I thought of how much has happened on my watch. How many children in our nation do not have adequate health insurance? How many children live below the poverty level? How many kids live in neighborhoods that are unsafe, surrounded by gangs and drug dealers? How many children fall behind in their education because they don’t have the homes and the support and the resources to discover just what a gift their life is? How many children are put in a horrible bind because their parents do not have the proper papers to live in this country? How many children are at risk because of how we have neglected to take responsibility for our environment, because we have been unwilling to curb our appetites and our desires? How many children suffer because we have glorified a consumer mindset that creates an ever accelerating treadmill of working to buy, and buying till we owe, and then working harder to pay off what we owe, and wanting more because something feels empty and buying promises to fill that void, and in the meantime, kids are shortchanged of the one thing that only their parents can give them, and that is something you can’t buy at a store. That thing is love. And in almost every situation of parenting, love is spelled T I M E. And how many children live in lands with wars and famines and pandemic diseases? I criticize God for one time testing Abraham and calling him to go up Mount Moriah? What does this God who has made himself vulnerable say about me...and you...when the landscape of our lives and our world is littered with mountains named Moriah? We fail the test every time a child suffers, every time a child is abandoned, every time a child dies.

Yes, God tests Abraham. Yes, the test is difficult, almost more than we can bear. Yes, he tells him to take his son and sacrifice him. But before we have the arrogance to shut the book on this God, know that God has bound himself to Abraham and Isaac. God has made himself vulnerable. God is intimately involved, and what comes of this test will be an affirmation of faith which can be leaned on and trusted in the deepest and darkest corners of our lives. What comes of this test is a continuing opportunity and call for people of faith to follow God and to have no idols before God. This is a test. God is seeking a people who will trust him completely.

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Moberly, “Living Dangerously,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Ellen Davis and Richard Hays), 195.

So we see Abraham and his beloved son making their way up Mount Moriah. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

Provide means to see ahead. When we see ahead, or when we follow the story, we see the Lord provides a ram in the thicket. Phew! Close one, eh?

What if we don't stop with the ram in the thicket? What if we allow ourselves to believe the Lord does see ahead. The conversation between Isaac and Abraham is not about a ram. Isaac asks, "Where is the lamb?" Abraham responds, "The Lord will provide the lamb."

Now let us ask whether God is vulnerable. Now let us ask whether God is bound to his people.

The gospel of John tells us of a God who became vulnerable, of a God who became bound to his people. The Word of God became flesh and made his dwelling among us. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, the Word of God who had become flesh and made his dwelling among us, the Baptist said, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Matthew and Luke tell of one who was holy and whose birth was lowly. Vulnerable? God Almighty arrived as an infant. Bound to us? He became one of us. His name is Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

When God speaks at the baptism of Jesus, he demonstrates how he is bound to his Son. "This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased."

One day this Son will walk up Mount Moriah. One day the Father will send the Son up Mount Moriah. As difficult to understand as it is, be sure the Father and the Son are bound together in this, a binding sealed through and through by the Holy Spirit. And know that the death of Jesus has bound us to God with a bind that can never be broken.

God sees ahead. God provides.

We don't see ahead. All we can do is stand before God and say, "Here I am." Sometimes it will be a test. Certainly there will be times in our lives that serve as a test. Will we trust God to see ahead? Will we trust God to provide? Will we trust the command and call of God in our lives? Other times it will be a trial or a tribulation. When you read the bible, it is clear that there are battles that rage, there is spiritual warfare, forces opposed to God, there is persecution and nakedness, there is sword and famine. In tribulation and trial, will we trust God to see ahead? Will we trust God to provide? Sometimes there will be tragedy and heartbreak, disappointment and devastation. Will we see God's footprints? Will we know God is vulnerable, that he is sharing in the heartbreak and sadness of human life? Will we look at the cross of Jesus and know our Savior is a man of sorrows, and intimately acquainted with suffering. In our darkest and deepest struggles, will we trust God to see a way ahead for us? To provide?

A couple of preachers challenged one another to memorize Romans, Paul's letter to the church in Rome. They all worked on it, and then decided once they memorized it to recite it for their congregations. No sermon. Just Romans.

One recounted his experience. Romans begins by telling us God had every reason to wash his hands of humanity, ending up with a sweeping statement, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But God didn't wash his hands. Just like we read today, God bound himself to humanity. One of the powerful moments in Romans is when the verse about all sinning and falling short is followed by these words about Jesus: "God

presented him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.” God’s vulnerability and God’s provision were met in Jesus. There was a sacrifice of atonement.

The binding of God and humanity is sealed and revealed in Jesus. Paul writes, “God proves his love for us in his: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

So this pastor is reciting these verses, and after the proving of love and binding and the vulnerability, Paul eventually gets around to testing and trials and difficult times.

What is so scary about the binding of Isaac is it touches those desperate places in our lives where the tests and trials and struggles want to unbind our faith, to cause it to unravel. What is so difficult about preaching on this passage is that some of you have had to release a child into the hands of God. That and a hundred other things that come our way threaten to unbind us and cut us off from God.

And Paul has a word to say about that. It is an inspired word. It is a divine word. It is a word forged in the fires of Mount Moriah and then hammered home on the hill called Calvary. Paul looks at all the things that threaten to unbind us, and he declares that nothing can separate us. The God who became vulnerable on our behalf and the God who bound himself to us and who suffered and died for us will not let anything separate us from his love. The Lord will provide. Indeed, he has. Lift your eyes. There is a lamb. He does take away the sin of the world.

Anyway, this pastor was reciting Romans, and he got to Romans 8. He said these verses. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose... What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The preacher said at that point the congregation did something amazing, and unprompted. They stood up and gave God a standing ovation. I think if they were there, Abraham and Isaac might have been the first ones up, and their clapping might have been the loudest.

I sat with a man who is dying yesterday. He is on a ventilator. He is so heavily sedated he is not even awake. His wife and a daughter were there. He is bound to that ventilator, and this family is having to give him up.

I brought my reading glasses and I brought my bible. We climbed up our own little Mount Moriah. Yesterday it was the ICU at Memorial City Hospital. I opened my bible to Romans 8. I read how nothing can separate us from the love of God. No one cheered. No one clapped. Instead, a woman who had shared 6 decades with this man sat with tears in her eyes. More importantly, in her heart she knew God was present. She knew God understood her suffering and her sadness. And as she smiled, we both understood again, in a new way, and in a very familiar way, that God would provide.