

What Does God Demand
Genesis 22:1-14

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All of us have trials we endure throughout our lives. Some just seem to stand out more than others. In Abraham's case there were two big ones – one at the beginning and one at the end. Sure, there were other lesser trials scattered throughout, but you could say that these two bookends almost defined everything in-between them.

The first trial was his initial calling, God sending him to a place he didn't know. In other words this was a journey without a destination. Go, just go, without knowing where. And Abraham and Sarah had to muster enough faith to cast off, leave behind all semblance of security, without a clear landing pad ahead. That indeterminacy was Abram's first challenge. You must travel by faith, day by day, trusting God to lead you. It's basic, elemental.

That was Abraham's first trial. To understand his last trial we need to remind ourselves of something in the middle. Some of you remember last week when

we talked about Abraham and Sarah and how they couldn't have children. Remember how Hagar the Egyptian slave woman acted as a surrogate, standing in for Sarah, and bore a child – Ishmael? And do you also remember how very late in age, so late that the news made Sarah laugh out loud at the thought of it, Sarah finally got pregnant and had the very late blessing of Isaac. And do you also remember how Sarah was filled with jealousy and demanded that Hagar and her son Ishmael be sent away? If you do, you recall how it happened that Hagar and her son were cast into the desert and wandered until they were delivered by God and used by God's purposes there. What one intended for evil God intended for good.

Well that late baby, Isaac, the child of their longing and old age, the child of postponed hopes and dreams, the treasured finally come baby, plays the central part of Abraham's last trial. Wouldn't you know that one of his two great challenges would involve a child? Isn't that true for most of us?

The story is incredible, awful, too terrible to be true.

From the very beginning we are told that what is about to happen is a test. Abraham understands that God is telling him to take his son, his only son, Isaac, the child of his old age, the son for whom he had waited for decades, go to a particular mountain and offer him up as a burnt offering. This means sacrifice his son, spill the blood of his only son to somehow please God.

Obedient, Abraham rises early, packs his donkey, and takes to servant men and his son, Isaac, with him. He cut wood for the offering and set out for the mountain. On the third day of travel he has the servant men stay behind and only he and Isaac continue, the wood for the sacrifice carried on Isaac's back.

Isaac is clueless as are the young men who have helped. "Where," asks Isaac, "are we going to find the sacrificial victim." Abraham only says that God will provide. When they finally arrive, Abraham lays the sacrificial altar with the wood, bound his son and laid him on top of it. Imagine the passive,

obedient and clueless Isaac's surprise: Me! I'm the sacrifice?

But just as the knife is plunging toward Isaac's jugular vein, an angel intercedes and says stop. The fact that he was willing to be obedient is enough. God never really desired Isaac's blood, only Abraham's willingness to do whatever was commanded. At that a substitute sacrifice is spotted, a ram in a thicket. It's a good day for sons and very bad day for rams.

Rabbis have debated and interpreted this passage for centuries. I was reading some of the Rabbinic midrashim in the Talmud and Mishnah yesterday. There is a tremendous effort to understand why in the world would God expect, demand such obedience – especially an act that would be considered an evil in itself, infanticide. A number of Rabbis conjectured that Satan had taunted God, saying that Abraham was not as faithful as thought. Just ask him to offer his own son, they said. And so the contest was on.

I don't believe a word of those interpretations but I understand what they were doing: They were trying to seek answers to imponderable questions.

Once upon a time a Rabbinical student, a yeshiva student, came to a certain breaking point. His mind was troubled, baffled and overloaded with mysterious and riddles he simply could not understand. So he ran out into the town square and started shouting at the top of his voice, "What is the meaning of life?" Over and over he begged for an answer. Well, everyone had opened their windows and were wondering what had gone wrong. This boy needs help. So the town's people decided he should go to see the Rabbi. When he stood before the Rabbi he pleaded and asked the same thing, "What is the meaning of life?" At that the rabbi slapped him. Stunned, the student asked why. And the rabbi said, "You should know better than to ruin a perfectly good question with an answer."

I actually think that's what most the Rabbis were doing with their interpretations of why God demanded what God did. They wanted to know

what got into God, something so irrational that it would lead to something so terrible.

And it was terrible because Isaac was the dream finally realized. And God was asking that the dream be sacrificed on the altar of ... what? Abraham didn't know. In fact, he didn't know any more about this than he knew when God said to start a journey without a destination.

Most of us have had to set out without knowing where we are going and even why. Most of us have had to survive stormy seas without knowing why it's happening to me or to us. We don't know the why but we find ourselves going anyway. We even find ourselves called to make great sacrifices and we often don't understand why the challenge exists or why we are required to do what we have done.

I have passed through several trials in my life for which there are no satisfactory answers as to why they exist or what good their altar of sacrifice will accomplish. But somehow we go anyway without knowing everything or anything at the time.

In the story I have less empathy for Isaac and that is strange, I know. He is, after all, the one with his neck on the line. But because he is so mindless he is not suffering – not until he finds himself tied down to the stack of wood on the mountain. They I'm sure he was filled with terror, and terror can be awful.

But Abraham is the one riddled with conflict. Isn't a father supposed to protect his children? Isn't a faithful person supposed to listen to the voice of God and then obey? But what when they come into conflict? Was I hearing correctly? Was this really the voice of God or just one of my own strange perceptions? Did Abraham secretly hope that his hand would be stilled at the last moment and Isaac spared? Did he know there was only one ultimate test of his loyalty, and that was to offer up the most precious thing? And if the most precious thing for us is not a child then what is it and are we willing to give it up?

In 1864 another Abraham, Abraham Lincoln, wrote a letter of consolation to Lydia Bixby following the death of five of her union soldier sons. Lincoln was a

man steeped in the language and thought of the scriptures and I, at least, hear echoes of Abraham offering his son Isaac in Lincoln's words:

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.

*Yours, very sincerely and respectfully,
A. Lincoln.*

There are times when so costly a sacrifice may need to be laid on the altar.

In Abraham's case this was a test and the knife was stopped before it drew blood. All that was needed was proof of willingness even when it didn't make sense, not logically it didn't.

But what when the sacrifice does happen, the awful necessary actually transpires?

I think there are actual times when we are called upon to sacrifice much with little understanding. But I want to suggest another way for us to get a hold of this intriguing text.

In both of Abraham's great trials – the first and the last – he struggles with *attachment*.

In the beginning of this story he is attached to security and is called to let go in order to take on a perilous journey without a certain destination or ending. He is attached to place and all that makes him feel safe and at in control of his world. It is only after he leaves all that structure and familiarity that he can open himself to all the possibilities God has for us.

At the end of his story he struggles with attachment again. But this is more than security; this is his most loved object, his son, the apple of his eye. Even that, attachment to one deeply loved, is something that must be released in order for God to return it to us. Faithfulness somehow believes trusts and follows. Ironically, it is only after Abraham is willing to let go and trust that he finds true freedom; he has passed the test.

I think that the greatest trial for each of us has been custom wrapped, just as it was for Abraham. And sometimes our trials are connected in repeating and surprising ways.

For one person it is this and for another that, but we are always tested in the ways that the secondary things get in the way of the primary things.

Once upon a time a holy man found a huge jewel by the side of the road. He had never seen such a stone before. It must be of incredible value he told himself. As he held it, admiring it, a traveler came by and saw the jewel in his hands. Aghast at its size and beauty he simply stared in wonder. Seeing his interest the Holy man asked if he would like to have it. "Of course!" the traveler said, and taking the stone he placed it in his bag so no one could see it, and skipped down the road.

In short order the Holy man had forgotten all about the jewel and was back to thinking deep thoughts about deep things. Suddenly the traveler appeared before him. Greeting him warmly the holy man asked if he could help him. And he answered yes he could. "What I would really like," he slowly said, "is whatever you have that gave that stone to me so easily."

The story of our souls is that we must follow without knowing exactly where we are going and let go in order to find what God will give us. It often makes little sense. But who says God makes sense?