

Genesis 22: 1-14

Pymble and Pymble Chapel 29.6.14

God who tests and provides

Genesis is throwing up some tough readings for us, and perhaps this story of God testing Abraham is one of the toughest stories in Scripture.

I've spent considerable time reading widely and reflecting on what is the contemporary word – God's word – for us this week,

and to tell you the truth, that hasn't been easy to discern.

So I thought I would provide a bit of an overview of various ways to approach this text and then suggest one possible way forward.

So, given the task before us, let us pray.

Loving God,

help us to come to the Scriptures with the right attitude.

Help us to both question the Bible stories

and yet also recognize their authority in our lives.

Help us to avoid a blind, uncritical acceptance of every story

yet also avoid only accepting the Bible passages that are easy and comforting.

We know that to follow Christ involves

denying ourselves and taking up our cross,

and we know that the Jesus-way to finding life is by losing it.

So teach us today from your word and help us be your disciples.

In Jesus name. Amen.

Before we begin with what some have said about this passage, let me first ask you to identify **your** response to this reading.

How did it make you feel as Ken read the story just now?

What do you feel about this God who provides Abraham with a son only to ask for that very son to be sacrificed in an act of worship?

What does this story do for your faith?

Does it help or does it make it more difficult for you to be a follower?

Is it fair enough that God asks for whatever he wants given he is our creator

or do you feel it is too cruel of God to test Abraham in this way?

Please be aware of your own starting point because your responses may not be mine nor those of the commentators I have read.

And so, to some of those contemporary scholars.

I don't believe I have read such strong comments on a passage for a long time. One website commentator that I go to regularly begins his writing this way,

"Let me make something very clear from the outset of the piece: I deeply dislike and thoroughly distrust this morsel of the sacred text."

This is Professor John Holbert from Perkins School of Theology, quoted in Patheos Preachers.

Then he gives the reason for his being so troubled by what he calls this powerful and memorable tale.

"[It is] because I have a son, and since I do,

I can now only see this text as a terrible form of child abuse.

When God asks for the son", he writes later, *"God asks too much."* His particular concern is that in an age where we have awful stories of child abuse on the front pages of our newspapers, we don't need a text that gives any encouragement or offers any chance of blurring the line between right and wrong.

We might respond to Professor Holbert that Abraham didn't actually kill Isaac and most importantly, God never wanted him to.

This is very important that we understand this point:

God never wanted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

But that is probably little comfort to Isaac who was bound upon the altar, with his own father holding aloft a shining blade, only seconds from death.

And it also holds little consolation for Abraham who must have been besides himself and questioning everything he thought he knew about this God who had called him to go from his homeland.

This poem from Andrew King, helps us explore the likely human responses of both Abraham and Isaac throughout this episode.

ISAAC

*Mile after mile we have walked toward
a distant hill in silence.*

*The wood grows heavy on my shoulders,
sticks for the altar biting into my back.*

*My father carries a smoldering coal
in a pot which sends smoke rising
around his face. The smoke must sting
because I think he is weeping.*

*I see him touching the knife
in his belt, lifting it again and again,
as if its weight, like the wood,
is burdensome.*

*To distract myself from my burden
I ask, "Where is the lamb
for the sacrifice, Father?"
He turns his stung eyes toward me.*

*"God will provide the lamb," he says,
and looks away again
toward the mountain as if
he must study the path up its flanks.*

*How old he looks,
walking beside me,
shoulders slumped beneath his beard,
his bent legs seeming to quiver.*

ABRAHAM

*Of all the miles I have travelled
in all the years of journeying
from Haran, this is the road
that's been hardest to walk,*

*this fire I carry consuming me,
this knife cutting into the heart of me,
grief stealing the breath in me
as we near the chosen hill.*

*How hard it was to lose Ishmael,
whom I sent into the wilderness
with Hagar, though God has assured me
that the boy will be father*

*to his own nation. But is not Isaac
the child of God's promise,
through whom my descendants
will be numerous as stars?*

*God, I have heeded your voice
from Chaldea to Canaan,
followed your calling with
trust in your word; I have faith*

*that you bless your servants.
Yet giving Isaac up may cost me more
than perhaps I have strength
to bear. I did not know that faith*

*was such fire. I did not know
that faith was so knife-edged.
God, is this wood he carries
meant for my son alone?*

*Or is the altar I will build
for my own heart?*

ISAAC

*At last I lay down the burden
of wood here at the top of the hill.
How carefully now my father arranges
each stone and stick of the altar,*

*each piece set in place like a gesture
of love. Again I ask him, "Where
is the lamb?" His eyes are wet
beneath his gray brows, his gray*

*beard trembles, like the hand
on my shoulder, his other hand
holding rope. "You know that I love you"*

he whispers; and as he begins

*to bind me, sobs it again,
and I begin to tremble too.
Both of us now are weeping as with
his old arms he lays me on the altar.*

We can't help but be overwhelmed by the human dimension of this scene that is largely overlooked by the text.

Even if God never wanted Abraham to offer Isaac, the asking of it is almost too much; almost beyond fair.

Another common route of interpretation is to see this story as the definitive declaration that God does not require child sacrifice in stark contrast to many religions of the ancient world. The story is in no doubt about this wide-spread practice and instead directs the Hebrew people to animal sacrifice as a means of coming to God in worship and in recognition of their sin.

A particularly Christian extension of this interpretation is to see in the words, "*God himself will provide the lamb*" a reference to Jesus as the lamb of God whose sacrificial death will allay God's wrath.

Needless to say, Prof Holbert and many others struggle with this interpretation of our most sacred story. If God demands the sacrifice of his own son for the sins of the world before his wrath can be satisfied, we might well ask what sort of God is this? Is this too, some sort of divine child abuse? The fact is, a careful reading of the New Testament reveals that Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice for our sins is only one interpretation of his death – there are many others that don't picture God as such a death-demanding deity.

Even so, we may gain some consolation in seeing this text as moving Israel away from the awful practice of child sacrifice.

Still another way of exploring to this text is to ask how we might respond to someone claiming to receive a similar command from God today. Surely if someone said that God had told them to sacrifice their son, we would be concerned for their mental health. And at the heart of modern terrorism is the deluded belief that God commands the killing of innocent people for a higher purpose. We would rightly label a modern-day Abraham mentally ill or a deluded extremist.

Yet it is perhaps asking too much of the text to stand up to our modern culture's standards and sensibilities. We must first read it against its own context

and only then seek to make that 4000 year jump to the 21st century.

And the first part of that
is what our old mate Walter Brueggemann does so well.
He helps us understand this story for what it meant
for the ancient people of Israel.
And Brueggemann suggests this is a story exactly as it sounds –
a story of divine testing;
God puts Abraham through a harsh, difficult experience
to test the faith of the one through whom
he was to build a nation and bless the world.
At the end of the episode
God knows something that he didn't know at the beginning.
After providing the ram, God says,
*"Now I know that you fear God
since you have not withheld your son from me."*
There is no all-knowing God here.
God has discovered something about the faith of Abraham
by putting him through this grueling examination.
And perhaps Abraham has found out something about himself as well.

Testing.

Stories of testing are common in literature and mythology,
ancient and modern:
from Harry Potter to The Matrix; from Zeus to Star Wars.
And the Bible is no different.
We might think of Job;
of Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry.
We might recall how Peter spoke of the persecution
the early Christians were experiencing
as a testing that refines their faith in the same way that gold is refined, *"that the
genuineness of your faith might be revealed
and result in praise and glory..."* 1 Peter 1:7

And what do we pray each week in the Lord's Prayer?
That we would be saved in the time of trial.
This idea of testing is deep in our tradition,
and I guess the most controversial thing about it
is whether the trials we experience are God-sent
or simply part of our everyday life.
It would be nice to be definitive about that but I think it is beyond us.
But what we do know is that when we go through harsh experiences,
we have a choice in how we respond.
We can be self-absorbed and stuck in the "why me's?"
or we can trust God and seek to make the best of a difficult situation;
to grow as a person and in our faith;
as the NT puts it,
"to work out our salvation with fear and trembling",
just as Abraham seemed to do.

Finally let us note, as the text outlines,
that as God tested Abraham in this way,

God also provided the ram.
Yes God asked a lot of Abraham, and of Isaac I guess,
but he also was the provider of the alternative; of the way out.
As we read in 1 Corinthians,
*“God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength,
but with the testing he will also provide the way out
so that you may be able to endure it.”* 1 Corinthians 10: 13

Let us leave the last words to Abraham and Isaac
in the conclusion to the poem that we begun earlier.

ABRAHAM

In my hand the knife, at my feet
the coal. The boy on the wood,
shaking and crying.
My own vision blurred with tears.

And then I hear the voice,
the angel saying, “Stop”,
and glad I am to stop,
and gladder still to see

the ram caught in a bush,
its horns tangled in branches,
and now I am crying with joy
as I cut loose my son

and seize the provided sheep
for the sacrifice, and I shout
praise to God for the giving
of the gift.

ISAAC

I give thanks to God
for the giving of the gift.
I am still shaking as the fire
consumes the altar.

But my father does not clean
the knife.
“I think I will keep it like this,”
he says, his gaze on the blood red blade.

“I think I will keep it like this
as a reminder.
Thanks be to God
for the gift.”