

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Pastor Jonna Bohigian

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Genesis 22:1 – 18

Abraham and Isaac

Gather around everyone, and I will tell you a story you won't believe! Grab a marshmallow and a roasting stick. Don't be shy; we've got plenty! But don't get too close to the fire pit, kids. These past couple of weeks, you've heard our family stories of Adam and Eve and of Noah, and today I will tell you about a man named Abraham and his son, Isaac.

Abraham lived a *long* time ago. He had a conversation with God, wherein God promised Abraham a son. Abraham waited and waited for this promised son. Abraham was *100 years old* when his son Isaac was finally born, and God promised him that through Isaac, many descendants would come and they would have land, and God would be their God forever.

Some time later, God tested Abraham. He told him to take his son, Isaac, whom he loved, and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. So Abraham took his son Isaac, and prepared to sacrifice him.

Abraham lived an interesting life, but *this* story of Abraham is one that has left people scratching their heads for *centuries*. Abraham waited for *years* for God to give him a son, and then God told Abraham to sacrifice him.

This is a fascinating story in large part, because it seems so matter-of-fact. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, so Abraham gets everything ready to sacrifice him, and then God stops him. Isaac is spared, and a ram is sacrificed instead. This story is so matter-of-fact, and we don't know what anyone is thinking along the way.

First of all, we don't know what *God* is thinking. We don't know *why* God wants to test Abraham or why he tests him like *this*. For God to ask that Abraham sacrifice the son he's waited *years* for seems about as extreme a request as you can get. Did God need to know that Abraham would be willing to sacrifice Isaac in order to fulfill the rest of the promise? If Abraham had failed the test, would God have

created a different outcome? Why did God need to test Abraham; couldn't He have simply known Abraham's heart, and so spared him the test? All we know from the outset is that God tests Abraham.

Secondly, we don't know what *Abraham* is thinking. Is he thinking that God will stop the sacrifice? Is he convinced that God will provide an alternate sacrifice, or is he thinking that God will provide him another son if Isaac dies? We don't know. All we know is that Abraham immediately obeys. We also know that previously, in Genesis 18, Abraham bargains with God to save a city. The bargaining continues for some time, and God continues to agree to the bargain. For someone who has successfully bargained with God to save a *city*, it seems odd that Abraham doesn't bargain to save the son he loves.

We also don't know what *Isaac* is thinking. Here is this young guy, who follows his dad and a couple servants on a journey to an unknown place. His dad tells the servants to stay so that father and son can worship. Isaac carries the wood and his dad carries a knife and fire. Isaac asks where the lamb is for the burnt offering, and his dad says that God will provide the lamb. His dad ties him up, lays him on the wood, and takes the knife to slay his son. Is Isaac's faith so great that he doesn't fear his life? We don't know.

There is a *lot* unanswered in this story. And perhaps for us, the most *difficult* or unbelievable part about this story is not the unanswered questions, but the *premise* of this story, that it is a test from God. A God who tests doesn't nicely fit into our theology of God.

Tests are not easy or pleasant. Tests cause anxiety and sweat, aggravation, lack of sleep, and high blood pressure. Tests are an intrusion into our already full and difficult lives. Tests could *not* be what God would want for us, *right?*

If you ask someone who God is, you may hear that God is love. If you ask what a God of love does, you may hear that God does what's best for us, because He has our best intentions in mind. God would not make or allow things to be harder for us; He is here to help us. What you hear is a theology of God, based on what love means to *that person*.

This is *so* tempting. It is *so* tempting to create a picture of what God looks like and how He acts, what He will and won't do, and base it on *our* definition, our desire for who God is or who He ought to be.

A God who tests *aggravates* us. A God who tests doesn't fit into our neat theology of how God should act. A God who tests *isn't* predictable and doesn't make our lives easy, as we think He ought.

It is easy to live as practical atheists, who live, work, go to school, eat, sleep, and wake up the next day to do it all over again without much of a thought of God. We pray, not because we need it, but because it is a good luck charm. We pray that God will bless us in all that we do, and don't ask what God would have us do. We're good people, so God won't interfere, right?

We live with the notion that we are in control of our lives, because life is pretty straightforward. We work hard; we receive our reward. Those who are lazy or bad don't get rewarded. Until something happens that is *completely* outside our control, something we never saw coming, something we would never wish on anyone. *Then*, we wonder why God didn't step in and prevent that *thing*. We once were so competent and proud, and now we feel weak and completely humbled.

It is at this point that some turn from faith. Their theology of God and their experience didn't match up. They believed in a loving God, yet something terrible happened to them. They reason that perhaps either there *is* no God or that this God is not someone they want to believe in.

This is why it is *so important* for Scripture to shape our theology. When we encounter difficult stories, like the story of Abraham and Isaac, one of our questions needs to be: What does this tell me about God? In this story, we learn that God is a God who tests.

In Scripture, this is not an uncommon theme. In the Old Testament, God tests His people while they are in the wilderness. He tests them with the food from heaven, telling them not to gather up more food than they will eat in one day, with one exception for the Sabbath. They are not to store up food but to be obedient to God's word. Later in the wilderness, God tests His people with a cloud surrounding a

mountain and invites only their leader, Moses, up the mountain. He tests them, so that the fear of God will keep them from sinning (Ex 20:20).

In the New Testament, we don't hear specific *stories* of God testing people, but we do hear multiple references to testing. Our primary example is in a prayer we pray every week, The Lord's Prayer. We pray, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt 6:13). When we pray this prayer, we may be referring to evil temptations. We pray that God keep us from evil temptations. This is a fine prayer, but the meaning of the prayer is greater than this. The word "temptation" is the same as the word "test." In this prayer, we are praying that God not lead us into a test "where we are driven to choose, decide, and risk for our...faith."¹ We pray that the test would not be so great, that we will fail. We pray to a God who tests and allows tests, and we pray that the test would not be too great.

Though we are left with many unanswered questions in the story of Abraham and Isaac, we are confronted with a God who tests, and a God who tests is ultimately in control – and we are not. We know He can test us too.

Before we think God entirely unreasonable or unloving for testing us, let's look at our own lives. When we are in school, we are tested not to experience cruelty, but to measure what we know. When we are children, we test our parents, to see if they will cave in to our demands. *Will mom or dad actually follow through with their threat to put me in time-out?* When I was little, I tested my parents every time they placed me in a car seat. I would scream and cry and demand through torture of the ears that they remove me from the harness I was strapped to. Yet, not once, did they allow me to roam free in the car; they gave me my rightful punishment every time. And when we are adults, we test our future spouses, to make sure that they are trustworthy.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 191.

Testing is not an inherently bad thing; it is a tool of proving. Are you who you say you are? Do you trust me like you say you do? Do you believe that God will fulfill His promises to you, and will you be obedient like Abraham?

Joan Rosenthal was a young woman, who had her whole life ahead of her. She was a Christian, who wholeheartedly dedicated her life to Jesus. As a teenager, she was diagnosed with Myasthenia Gravis (MG), a long-term neuromuscular disease. She lost the ability to move her legs and arms, to swallow, to communicate clearly, and to breathe without a respirator. She was a young woman with her whole life ahead of her, and she was confined to hospital beds.

She poured over Scripture, reading stories of healing and prayer. She prayed, and was convinced that God would heal her of MG. She began to thank God for healing her, though she could not see any progress. She kept this revelation of healing to herself, since any progress was not yet visible. But slowly, she began to heal. She regained her ability to swallow, to speak, and to use her hands. She was able to move back home. She thanked God for healing her. She loved living at home – the sights, the sounds, the smells – it was beautiful.

But over time, she began to regress. She lost her abilities and needed to return to the hospital. She couldn't understand *why* this was happening. God had promised to heal her, she had thanked Him for healing her, she began to heal, and now she was back at the hospital. This was a great test in God's promise to her.

Her doctor suggested a new treatment, a possible cure, but Joan resisted because she believed in God's promise that *God* would heal her. She needed input, and sought out her trusted pastor. She spoke with him about God's promise to her and her continued belief that *God* would heal her.

He responded by saying that God can heal through medicine and doctors. He recommended that she consider God's healing *through* this new treatment.

Joan was convinced that God would heal her, and she came to believe that God would heal her *through* medicine. She placed herself in the doctor's care and underwent the experimental treatment. In short order, she began to heal and was restored to health.

For 18 years, Pastor Joan served as pastor and chaplain at Sunny View Retirement Center in Cupertino. She ministered to *many* residents and family members, and became a beloved friend of Laurie and Brad Vroom. When you visit the courtyard at Sunny View, you will find a bench resting in the shade, with a dedication to Pastor Joan, who was faithful to God, through times of testing and times of joy.

A poem for you, by Pastor Joan, entitled "Happy Endings."

I remember sitting in front of the television,
the brand new invention,
when I was a little girl, seven or eight.

My brother came into the room as I watched the little screen
and he asked me what I was doing.
"I'm writing it all down," I answered hurriedly,
not wanting to miss any of the story.

And indeed, I was quite literally writing down the story.
I was watching "The Lone Ranger."
I was fascinated by how the episodes,
the individual stories of the series, were put together.
How the tale grabbed my interest before the first commercial.
How the story moved, and characters came and went and interacted.

And finally how the story came together,
all ends neatly woven together into a satisfying ending.
As I would watch the stories, something inside me also felt satisfied and whole.

It's funny, but I still know the feeling I had at the end of each episode.
That reassuring sense that there were happy endings

in the midst of a world
that sometimes seemed a little shaky and unreliable.

It's the same assurance I have found as I have grown,
that full assurance that there is indeed One,
greater than the Lone Ranger,
Who is at work, week after week and moment by moment
bringing peace and justice into our crazy world
in ways that we can't even begin to see yet.
May we ride at His side, like Tonto, courageous and faithful.²

This God, this mysterious God, who tests and proves *Himself* to be faithful, is alive and active in our world. He, who did not desire the sacrifice of Abraham's only son, whom he loved, gave *His* only Son to die for you and for me, that we might be saved. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). God "did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for us all" (Rom 8:32).

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church, may we "glory in our sufferings [and in our times of testing], because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Rom 5:3 – 5). Amen.

² <https://www.plts.edu/alumni/memorial.html?id=12363>