

Today we have another installment in the story of Abraham from the book of Genesis. For the past three weeks we have been hearing about God and Abraham and their relationship. Three weeks ago the Lord appeared to Abram and told him to pick up all of his things and move his family and extended family to a land that God would show him. "There," God says, "I will make of you, Abram, a great nation." And without uttering a word Abram does as the Lord tells him and takes his brother Lot and the entire clan to the land that the God shows him.

Then, two weeks ago, we heard about Abraham, who was resting by his tent when three men or angels approached. Abraham prepares a feast for them, showing great hospitality. They inquire about Sarah and the Lord tells Abraham that she will have a son. Again, Abraham does not utter a word, but Sarah laughs! Sarah cannot imagine how, at their advanced age, she will be able to have a child. When the Lord questions her about her laughter she, in fear, denies that she laughed. And her son is named Isaac, the one who laughs.

Last Sunday we heard the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Remember that Ishmael was Abraham's first son, born with his slave woman because Sarah had not been able to have a child. Fast forward to the great feast in celebration of Isaac's being weaned. Sarah notices Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac playing together and she tells Abraham that she wants them gone from her household. Again, Abraham does not utter a word. But God assures Abraham that he should do as Sarah demands. God tells Abraham that his offspring will be born through Isaac. God also tells Abraham that a nation will be born through Ishmael because he is also Abraham's offspring. So Abraham sends Hagar off the next morning with a skin of water and some bread.

Have you noticed the three-fold pattern in these stories? God commands Abraham to do something unreasonable. Then Abraham, without uttering a word, responds to God's commands. And what happens? God makes good on God's promise. God provides.

Which brings us to today's installment in the life of Abraham. We join the family some years later, probably a dozen or more, although we know little about what has transpired during that time. The passage begins with these words "God tested Abraham." The King James Bible says, "God **tempted** Abraham" but the more accurate translation is "God **tested** Abraham." God **tested** Abraham. God tells Abraham to take his son and offer him as a burnt offering. So Abraham, without uttering a word, gets up the next morning and begins the journey, with Isaac and two young men, to the place God indicated.

This story is hard! It is absurd! After waiting for what seems an eternity for a son, Sarah has Isaac, and now God, the same God who promised that Isaac will bring forth many offspring and become a great nation, is telling Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. What kind of God is this? Why doesn't Abraham object and tell God that these commands and expectations have gone too far? Why doesn't Abraham walk away, pack up his clan and go back to his original land? And where is Sarah? Sarah who persuaded Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away into the wilderness, where is Sarah? I can imagine her response to God if she had heard this absurd command. "You have got to be kidding me? After waiting for ninety years, you want Abraham to kill Isaac. No way! Find yourself someone else to torment. We are done moving and waiting and listening to this nonsense!" But Sarah is no where to be found and Abraham does not utter a word.

And then there is the matter about God's command. Do you wonder like I do about God's instruction to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love," after all Abraham had two sons? Through the centuries rabbis have written explanations of the text. These explanations are referred to as Midrash. One Midrash explains the passage this way:

[God says to Abraham:] ‘Take your son’, [to which Abraham replied] ‘I have two sons’. [So God continued:] ‘Your only one.’ [To this Abraham replied] ‘This one [Isaac] is the only one to his mother, and this one [Ishmael] is the only one to this mother.’ [To this God replied:] ‘Which you love.’ [Abraham then responded:] ‘I love both of them.’ [So finally God said:] ‘Isaac.’ (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 89b)

In the Midrash Abraham speaks, but in Genesis Abraham is silent. The Midrash offers an explanation about which son. The Midrash also gives Abraham a voice in this story. I appreciate the Midrash because it helps answer some of my questions and it makes Abraham a vocal participant in this story. But the Midrash doesn’t make the story any easier.

Finally Abraham in the Genesis passage speaks to Isaac, but only after Isaac says, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham replies, “God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walk on together.

Some scholars believe this story, which is known as the ‘binding of Isaac,’ was a test of faith and obedience for Abraham while other scholars think that the event is more a test for God. We can easily see how this might be a test for Abraham – will he do as God has commanded, is Abraham faithful and obedient? But a test for God? How is this a test for God?

In order to understand God’s test we need to review Genesis. Already by the 12th chapter, when God calls Abraham, we have witnessed the steady human rejection of God from the betrayal in the garden, the murder of a brother and the rapid escalation of violence. God cleanses the earth with the flood, but humankind doesn’t really change. So God comes up with a new strategy. Rather than trying to give a blessing to all humankind, God chooses one man Abraham and Abraham’s faithfulness. This blessing is revealed in Abraham’s call “I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse. And through you all the families of the earth shall experience blessing.” It is through Abraham and his offspring that God’s blessing will be given through the whole world.

So God chooses Abraham through whom God will bless the whole world, but after a time God is wondering if Abraham has the right stuff. After all Abraham has started to act like he does not completely trust God. Twice he has passed off Sarah as his sister and allowed her to enter the king’s harem during their journey. God needs to find out if Abraham, this single human thread upon which all blessing hangs, will hold firm. God does not know how Abraham is going to react to God’s command until the very last moment when Abraham’s arm is raised to deliver the fatal cut. It is then, as we want to scream, to turn away and to cover our eyes, that God’s angel intervenes and says, “Now I know that you are a God-fearer, and you did not withhold your son, your only one, from me.” (v. 12)

Ellen Davis, Old Testament Scholar says, “If we take these words [spoken by the angel] seriously, then we have to believe that there is something God now knows for the first time. What God knows now is so crucial that this most terrible ‘test’ (v. 1) was devised, in order to show whether in fact Abraham cares for God above everything and everyone else – even above Isaac, his son and his own slender hope for fulfillment of God’s promise.”¹

Abraham passes the test and we hear God’s relief in the verses immediately following our passage for today. God says “I will indeed bless you and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore....and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” (v. 17-19)

Ellen Davis says, ‘This story shows us a God who is vulnerable in the context of covenant relationship. In fact,’ she says, ‘both Old and New Testaments maintain the covenant

with God is fundamentally an unbreakable bond of love (hesed). Ordinary experience teaches that love and vulnerability are inextricably linked: we are most vulnerable to emotional pain when the well-being and the faithfulness of those we love are at stake.”²

The covenant with God is fundamentally an unbreakable bond of love. And this covenant is not just one-sided. God loves and blesses us and we are expected to love and be faithful to God above all else. We will continue to encounter times of testing – time when it is seductively attractive to find an easier, less demanding alternative to God. God is demanding. God commands us to “Love God with all our heart, soul and mind and our neighbors as our self.” This is not only the greatest commandment; the one above all others. It is also very, very hard to do.

We love our family and our work, our possessions and our status more than we love God, our neighbor and our self. It is hard work to keep our focus on God, to take the time to stay connected to God, to be quiet enough to hear the still small voice of God. Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer we ask God to ‘save us from the time of trial’ - to protect us from the time of testing. Rest assured, we will be tested, but it is not God who is testing us. God tested Abraham, once for all, and we have received God’s blessing because Abraham passed the test.

God has blessed us through Abraham and his faithfulness. God provided for Abraham. God provides for us because God loves and blesses us. When we are tested, and we will be tested, our response is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and to be faithful trusting God who is in covenant with us and who has blessed us. We know God will provide.

¹ Ellen Davis, “Take Your Son””: The Binding of Isaac in **Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament**, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001, p. 61.

² Ibid, p. 62.