

I'll confess that I really don't like this passage at all. I've struggled – along with many people over centuries – to understand it and to find something in it that I can cling to.

The word that came to my mind is sacrifice. It's an easy word to say, maybe an easy subject to talk about sometimes, but a very hard thing to do. This passage takes us back to a primitive time. The idea that God would ask Abraham to do something so unthinkable - to take his son who was promised and offer him as a sacrifice! It's inhumane and brutal to us – and should be. I'm thankful this is not where we are now, and yet we know that there are children caught in despicable and tragic situations.

In Abraham's time, we know that human sacrifice – even child sacrifice – happened in some other groups who worshipped other gods. It was not viewed as madness, violence, or abuse, but was seen as a sign of leadership and devotion. A costly price to pay, but seen by people in those cultures as necessary from time to time.

But imagine if we heard this story on the news today! How would we react? Certainly this is not of God. Anytime we hear of children killed in violent acts, even in recent weeks children and young people who are victims of violence, haven't we found ourselves shaking our heads and wondering why? When will it end?

And I'll confess: I'm uncomfortable with the idea that God “tests” us. I know what the Scripture says, but I struggle with it. I hear people say it as they process their own life situations - how or why God was sending “trials” their way. I struggle with the question: does God test us, or is it simply what happens because we are human? Author Madeleine L'Engle says that perhaps this story tells us more about our human understanding of God rather than simply telling us about God's nature.

It seems uncharacteristic that God would test Abraham in this way. Consider how God has been so far – a tender caregiver who provided for Hagar and Ishmael, a special visitor who repeated the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah, and One who blessed Abraham with a call. How could God who has promised great things to Abraham ask this of him?

This isn't the God I know...the God I worship...the God I pray to. For me, this is terrible - and terribly messy. I want to know where the conversation is between God and Abraham. Where's his outrage? I want to know what Sarah says about it - if she even knows! I want to know how Abraham and Isaac continue to live together after this moment. How do you move on from this?

Even with all of the questions about the specifics, I wonder how we might look at the idea that God does call us to sacrifice. I don't mean that God calls us to sacrifice children. But God *does* call us to sacrifice in many ways – to trust in him even when we can't see the whole picture. Part of our commitment is giving up whatever else we might put our hope in. After all, God made the promise of Isaac in the first place. The promise is a gift that Abraham receives, not a possession that he has.

What kind of God would ask this? What kind of person – what parent – would go along with it? Abraham doesn't appear to question God or complain or weep, but obeys God. Other times, he challenges God or argues, but not here.

He and Sarah waited 25 years for Isaac after God promised him. They threw a big party for Isaac, and now Abraham's going to end it. Here Abraham is docile. I'm angry at him, and I wonder if he's angry at God. Again Madeleine L'Engle says that our best response here is silence.

But perhaps it's about obedience to God. Again, I'll confess that my heart aches when Isaac asks the question:

*"Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"*

Abraham says, "God will provide the lamb." I'm not sure if he says it with hope that God will make another way, or if he says it with complete assurance in God's purpose.

Regardless, it's a faith statement – even when we're called to sacrifice what matters most to us, God will provide what we need. Easier said than done, right?

Abraham's ultimate role is a servant of God – no less than each of us. One thing we learn from him is that faith comes with a cost. Yes, God's grace in is a free gift to us, but faith in that gift requires our response. We demonstrate faith by giving up what is most important to us. Isaac represented God's promise of Abraham's legacy. To give that up was a major step of faith.

Faith requires us to do something – not just say it, but do it. Faith isn't easy. But then anything that matters to us means sacrifice, doesn't it? Marriages, family relationships, and friendships require that we give of ourselves. Raising children requires sleepless nights and spending time doing things they want to do. Being the church requires that we gather here and offer ourselves in service to God. Building a community requires us to meet people and do something for the common good.

Bishop Will Willimon tells of one man's reaction to this moment in Abraham's life. The man said, "when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I'm near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about on Sunday mornings. Abraham's God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more, I want to know *that* God."

I hear this man, but then I question myself: do I really want to know that God? Do we really want to know that God? Sometimes I'm content with the buddy-buddy God who doesn't demand much from us, but that's not the God we serve. God asks for our total commitment. God asks for our whole lives - not just when it's convenient for us.

We pride ourselves on independence. But do we consider our *dependence* – our need for God? We're dependent on God who asks for our trust and our heart – to bring hope and healing to the whole world. We're dependent on God who calls us to sacrifice for the sake of others – for the sake of the whole world.

The story is told that over 400 years ago, Martin Luther's wife, Catherine, listened to him read this account from Genesis 22. She demanded, "How could a loving God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son?" Luther replied, "Why, Katy, he did it himself."

Our highest priority as parents is to provide a safe and happy environment for our children – and to protect them, so this interplay between Abraham and Isaac is hard for us to swallow. But it can make us more aware of God's sacrifice for us – that God

would send would send Jesus for us. How overwhelming – that ultimately God provides what we need – a Savior to redeem us and set us free.

I understand Martin Luther making that connection to Jesus, but I don't think it's as simple as that. For me, this part of Abraham's story is meaningful because it's so messy. Again, I really don't like it much, but perhaps it does remind us that we're called to make hard choices every day.

And it's a reminder that we're in relationship - that give-and-take - with God who will not fail. Maybe our struggles aren't exactly like Abraham's, but we go through incredibly difficult times - sometimes with God, sometimes with others, and sometimes with both at the same time!

Abraham's faith led him to places he didn't want to go. Just like that first calling from God to go to a new country, Abraham offered up his future to God. Isaac was his future – the promise of what would be – but God said, “Give it up.” When God calls us to sacrifice, how do we know that there's a purpose behind it? Abraham obeyed God because he believed in God. And we trust that God wants good for us.

Someone said: “God accepts us where we are, but God does not intend to leave us where we are.” Our faith life calls us to make sacrifices: sacrifices of time and energy, sacrifices that affect our family and relationships, sacrifices made now with hope of a better future. Living for Jesus Christ is a sacrifice. Developing Christian character takes work. Love, compassion, obedience, and faithfulness don't come so naturally to us. It's usually other things – like jealousy and indifference – that come naturally.

So sacrifice is at the center of our faith life. It's part of Christian DNA to sacrifice. There are other things we could do, but we make time read the Bible, worship, and pray. There are many things we'd like to have, but we offer our money, time, and talents – which ought to be a sacrifice. Giving is a sacrifice and a spiritual discipline – not an optional part of faith.

Faithful living isn't easy, so why would anyone want to even try it? Friends, we learn why from Abraham. We seek to be faithful because God is faithful. God is faithful to promises made. And we're called to be a blessing.

“The Lord will provide.” God will not fail. God intervenes in our lives. God helps us through trials. And those tough times become testimonies of God's faithfulness.

Ultimately, God who is good breaks into a situation that is despairing. Life comes into a situation of death. God provides. God redeems. And there's faith in the midst of terrible trauma.

There's power in a testimony when a person has been through hell and back and will tell about it. We may view broken marriages, troubled family members and friends, disappointment, grief, an unhappy job, or fighting an illness as “tests” of faith because we figure out how strong our faith has to be to get through them.

We learn that God's promises are steadfast, even when our lives are in shambles. We learn just how present and loving God truly is when we need to know it the most. Perhaps our faith is not necessarily tested, but rather our faith in God is confirmed.

“Sacrifice”

July 16, 2017

*In the Beginning: (God's) Family Drama series*

The best news is that God shows up. God shows up in our lives, and God's Spirit renews us to go out and be people of hope and faith in a confusing and broken world. God has sacrificed for us, and we make sacrifices for God's sake – to go places we don't want to go, to trust God when life is in a shambles, to give even what matters the most over to God so that God can use it for good. We use the language of sacrifice – that we might offer ourselves as a holy and living sacrifice because of all God does for us in Jesus Christ.

We can't imagine exactly what Abraham went through, but consider what we encounter every day – how some might say our faith is tested every day. Children are kidnapped, abused, killed. Young people addicted to drugs and alcohol before they can vote. Marriages break down. Family members won't speak to each other. Friendships fade and die. People die in places of war, from hunger, and from disease.

The challenge is that God calls us to sacrifice for the sake of others that they might know the joy and peace of God's grace. Like Abraham, we carry God's promise: “The Lord will provide.” We can trust God to guide us, even in chaos. We can let the power of God offer us freedom from sin. We can help each other in hard times and encourage one another through prayer, study, worship, conversation, and fellowship. We sacrifice because God will provide. God will not fail.

Thanks be to God. AMEN!