

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
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“The Trouble with Faith”
Genesis 22:1-14

I have to resist delivering an “All’s well that ends well” sermon today. It is a tempting option to gloss over the difficult details of the text before us and just point out that everything worked out OK in the end. It would be much easier as a pastor and a preacher – and frankly, even as a person of faith – if I could avoid a journey through the complicated stuff this text is made of and focus my sermon this morning on the provision of God, pointing out the rams in the thickets of our own lives and the surprising moments of deliverance and care that God so graciously offers.

But the passage won’t let me.

Right from the start we are aware that this situation is not one of human making into which God intervenes. Nope, truth is, it’s a drama in many ways of God’s own making. God tests Abraham, the scripture tells us, by instructing him to take his son Isaac to the place he will show him and offer him as a sacrifice. And so we journey with Abraham and Isaac to the top of a mountain named Moriah to an isolated area where Father Abraham binds his own, precious son, and prepares to murder him at God’s command. Sure, God jumps in at the last minute, intervening into this horrific scene, sparing Isaac, and providing a ram which Abraham can sacrifice in Isaac’s stead.

It is a familiar story, one many of us have heard, surprisingly so, since our childhood. Yet it is one of the most complicated, confusing stories of our faith. Why would God promise Abraham that his descendents would be as countless as the stars, then suggest a course that would break this promise, ending the life of his promised heir? If the answer is that God knew how this would end – that he would never require Isaac’s death – then why did he make this request in the first place – and scar Isaac for life? What kind of a God creates these twisted sorts of tests? What kind of God would ever make such a demand on a parent?

We have often heard this passage preached in a way that applauds Abraham’s faith. He is heralded as a man of unprecedented faith, a man of God’s own heart. We are taught to be like Abraham, to be willing to put everything on the line, even the one we hold most dear, to out of obedience to God. We are challenged to emulate Abrahamic faithfulness in our own lives, and to trust in God with unquestioning abandon.

But taking that message away from this text doesn’t sit quite right with me.

The reality is throughout Genesis, Abraham’s faith *does* waver, and Abraham *does* question God. Abraham’s journey of faith is full of mis-steps that compromise his own well-being and the safety of others. Abraham in fear lies to Pharaoh and says that Sarah is not his wife, offering his own wife to the ruler to spare his life. Abraham’s impatience at

God's fulfillment of this promised child leads Abraham to take a concubine and have another child against God's will – not the child God ordained. At Sarah's urging – and yes, with God's blessing – Abraham sends his son, Ishmael, and his mother Hagar off into the wilderness and God tells him to let him go. Abraham argues with God, pleading with God to save Sodom, yet never speaks a word on behalf of his own son Isaac.

Abraham's faith has always been a clumsy sort of faith – a real life sort of faith – with some good choices and bad choices as landmarks along the way.

And I outright challenge any claim that we should praise Abraham for his actions in our text for today. I do not think it is an acceptable option to bind one's child and prepare to sacrifice him/her to God. Such an act is, unequivocally, an act of abuse and violence of one with power over and against a weaker person. Our modern sensibilities know that if this scenario were to play out in our day, Abraham would be in jail and Isaac would wind up under the care of child protective services. And rightly so.

This passage is a difficult one to hear in this post-9/11 world, when we are all too familiar with stories of religious extremism gone awry, of acts of violence authorized with "God made me do it" language. We can look through the chronicles of history, too, and see that there has been war, execution, abuse, oppression, enslavement, discrimination – injustice of any variety – all done in the name of God. There have been innocent victims sacrificed at the hands of suicide bombers and of gunmen outside abortion clinics, all claiming to be acting on Divine authority. We know this isn't so – that such beliefs are psychotic at best and sociopathic and worst. That's just not how God works – right?

Yet, when I read this text I have to come to terms with the God who is the actor in this story and the God who I worship and serve. Are they one and the same? How can I understand this story in the light of the Good News of my faith?

I'm not the first one to ask these questions, nor will I be the last. Commentators throughout the ages have wrestled with this passage and sought to make sense of a story that, quite frankly, doesn't make a lot of sense. Some interpretations soften the struggle, providing insights that may be helpful to our understanding. They make connections between Isaac and Jesus, saying this narrative is an Old Testament text that points out to us what God would later do through Jesus. Others rely on a profession of God as mysterious, transcendent and holy; that we just can't know the mind and heart of God in its fullness.

Calvin discusses this story as a multi-layered crisis of faith. Abraham's struggle is grounded not only in the potential outcome of this command, but in the contradiction of God's own word in Abraham's life. God had promised Abraham greatness through Isaac, and yet here God appears to be telling Abraham that this heir is going to be taken from him. Calvin suggests that when faced with such a crisis, Abraham chooses to trust that God will not break God's word – that God will, somehow and against all odds, be true to God's promise. So Abraham acts within a context of trust that the God he loves, too, will never take his son away.

A contemporary theologian makes sense of this passage by claiming it as an outright witness against child sacrifice – that in God’s provision of the ram and God’s sparing of Isaac, God is demonstrating God’s opposition to such tactics which were common practices of various religions of the time. She also suggests that while we know that God tested Abraham, we do not actually know what actions would have resulted in a passing grade. Did God want Abraham to stand before God and claim ethical, loving behavior or did God desire blind obedience? She raises the possibility that God’s hope was for Abraham to protect Isaac, to protect the blessing God had given, not follow through with this command. She suggests that God had to jump in and say “enough!”

So what does it all mean? Where is the good news for us? As I add my voice to the discourse, I cannot claim to have all the answers. The waters are muddy. For we know what is in the text, but it is also true that we don’t always know the mind and heart of God. There are passages that elude us, where we are reminded that sometimes God’s ways are not our ways and are too mysterious to comprehend.

I suggest that the heart of this passage is about faith – about our faith in God and about God’s faith in us. This passage tells us quite directly that faith is not easy – whether it is our faith in God or God’s faith in us. Faith requires trust and hope – in times of our life when either of these virtues may be in short supply. I believe that this story shows us a bit about humanity trying to be faithful lovers of God and about God trying to figure out how to be a faithful God engaged in relationship with us; with a people trying to do our best within the realm of a transcendent reality that sometimes eludes us and the realm of our day to day struggles and celebrations. God and Abraham are trying to figure out how to make such a relationship work.

But we know that faith isn’t easy. It can be challenging and even problematic at times. And the trouble with faith is this: it demands something of us. It requires us to respond, to do something, to try to discern what God would have us do and to do our best to be faithful to God’s call. It requires us to live not only for ourselves and our own desires or whims but to live for others and to live for God. Faith demands something of us – **to trust that God will somehow make everything OK, even when the situation at hand is clearly anything *but* OK. Faith requires us to keep showing up when life, and even when God, does not make sense: when loved ones suffer or suddenly die, when our savings dries up, when opportunities are slim, when joy fades. Faith inspires us to worship a God who we don’t always understand, to place our hope that God’s love and goodness will prevail and that God will, at the end of the story, provide for our needs.**

This isn’t easy, and at times it seems impossible. It is superhuman request, one that requires us to be more than ourselves, aware of our limits and our failings. Faith may seem a distant hope when our well has run dry, when we are depleted by the multiple demands of our world or wounded by those around us. Faith requires more of us than we have to offer ourselves. It’s tough, sometimes elusive; sometimes unheard of.

Faith inspires us to believe that somehow, some way, God will provide, that God will keep God's promises for us and for the world. Faith can keep us going, putting one foot in front of the other and heading into uncharted – even scary, even dangerous – territory because we hope that at the end of the journey God will be there, will provide for our need, and will lead us safely home.

And our story lets us believe this. God is good, in the end. God keeps God's promises and God is true to God's word. God intervenes and spares the child Isaac. God builds a nation through Abraham after all. God, even in this mess, is trustworthy still.

And if we wonder, if we're not sure we've gotten this interpretation right, all we have to do is situate this story within the larger picture of our faith. When the narrow view still raises to questions, we can shift to a wide angle focus and see this chapter as part of a larger story. When we do so we see:

- *A God who loves the people God has created, and continually calls them to relationship with God's own self.*
- *A God who never gives up on God's people, sending prophets and teachers through the ages to lead God's people to the Promised Land and to call them back to faith.*
- *A God who came to us in Jesus, becoming fully vulnerable to us in Christ and bearing the burden of all of our wounds and all of our sacrificial tendencies within God's own self.*

While God does not cease to require our faithfulness, the divine-human relationship is infused with grace through the love of God in Christ Jesus. A God who comforts us, leads us, inspires us, and gives us hope through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and gives us peace.

This is a God worthy of our praise. Thanks be to God. Amen.