

June 28, 2026 - Trinity Episcopal Church - 5th Pentecost

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God tested Abraham.

Genesis 22:1

“God tested Abraham,” our first scripture reading from this morning begins. And this part of Genesis — this particular story — certainly tests me, tests us. It is a story I find confounding and horrifying, and it presents God in a way which seems inconsistent with how we’ve come to know God. (I’m not alone in my assessment, either... generations of rabbis and Jewish scholars have wrestled with this passage, as well, as long as this story has been told.)

In Hebrew, this story of Abraham and Isaac is known as the “Akedah” which means binding for sacrificial offering. It’s a story that comes at a curious time in the narrative arc we’ve been following over the past few weeks, over several chapters in the book of Genesis. Curious because God and Abraham have now known each other for a long, long time. God has made promises, covenant promises, to Abraham, about Abraham becoming the father of a great people, with descendants more numerous than the stars or grains of sand. God would be their God, and they

would be God's people, and blessings would abound because of that relationship.

God has asked things — hard things — of Abraham many, many times, and *mostly* Abraham has followed through. (Although Abraham and Sarah *did* lose patience there for a bit, and decided to pursue the making of an heir through Sarah's maid, Hagar, when they thought God wasn't moving on the plan to create numerous descendants fast enough. Abraham having a child with Hagar wasn't part of God's original plan, but God flexed and adapted, and didn't give up on Abraham.)

The God we've seen in the past 10 chapters of Genesis is a God who shows up, a God of compassion, a God of second chances, a God who hears peoples' cries, a God of justice and of mercy. God has committed and recommitted to Abraham, and Abraham has done the same in return. So why should God test Abraham yet again, and why oh why test him using child sacrifice?

I find the reasons served up by most commentators and theologians wholly unsatisfying, and in some cases, barbaric and cruel. The most frequent explanation the experts proffer is that God was trying, one more time, to take the measure of Abraham's loyalty and devotion. But really, can you imagine? If someone you

knew and loved and respected came to you and said, “Hey, how much do you love me?” and then asked you to prove it by destroying or maiming or terrorizing your child or another beloved.... if someone demanded that you do that, you’d call that abuse and you’d take your kid or other loved one and get as far away from them as possible.

I read an analysis by another theologian who argued that God and Abraham were in cahoots in this story. Though the text says that God *tested* Abraham, supposedly Abraham actually *knew* that it was *just* a test — that God was never going to let Isaac be harmed. So, if this was a ruse that both parties were in on, then why do it? One theory was that this story would prove to the world that the God of Abraham was a different kind of god — one that didn’t require human sacrifice, like so many of the pagan gods did. While that’s a wonderful thing to convey — Yay! Our God is more compassionate and evolved than your god — what about poor, traumatized Isaac?

And there are more theories....that God’s testing Abraham was a chance for Abraham to build the “muscle” of his faithfulness and devotion, which is the kind of thinking that leads to sayings that we use today, erroneous and damaging phrases like *no pain, no gain*, and *what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger* and *God*

never gives us more than we can handle. (Can we please agree to strike those aphorisms from our personal vocabularies?)

Perhaps God was passive-aggressively getting back at Abraham for abandoning Hagar and Ishmael, or for hooking up with Hagar in the first place? Or maybe Abraham misunderstood God's instructions, and got it wrong?

I don't know. I don't have a satisfactory answer for the *why* behind this part of scripture. So after discarding the explanations and theories that try to make this all o.k., I end up back where I started, of being horribly bothered by this story, even if Isaac does make it out alive. "*All's well that ends well*" is a cheap consolation which neither accounts for the terror Isaac suffered, nor for the troubling reality that he was treated as a means to an end.

And that's the part that I've been thinking about this week... the ways we have sacrificed — the ways we continue to sacrifice — children.

I remember my first Old Testament course in seminary, when we were talking about this story, and our professor showed us photos of a sculpture that is displayed on the campus where he did his PhD, at Princeton. The sculptor, George Segal, was

commissioned to create a piece as a memorial of the conflict that led to the fatal shooting of 4 students on the Kent State University campus, May 4, 1970, when Ohio National Guard troops were called in to quell the on-campus anti-war protests.

The sculpture, called Abraham and Isaac, shows two figures: Abraham, wielding a knife, stands above a kneeling Isaac, whose wrists are bound in front of him. The figures are depicted in modern day attire, and are meant to express the conflict, as the artist put it, “between adherence to an abstract set of principles”¹ — fighting a war in Vietnam, for instance — and the young people who are sacrificed in pursuit of those principles. While the original intention was to display the artwork at Kent State, university officials rejected it, due to what they thought of as its violent imagery and the controversy it might stir up. (It ended up at Princeton, because Segal taught courses there.)

Every time we experience a school shooting in this country, and no policies or laws change as a result of it, we’re reminded of our collective willingness to sacrifice our children on the altar of nearly unfettered access to deadly weapons.

¹ <https://www.dailyprincetonian.com/article/2019/11/art-in-the-bubble-abraham-and-isaac>

Whenever funding for food assistance programs (like SNAP) is cut, children are disproportionately impacted, not only because of the large percentage of kids in the program, but because children's bodies, which are still developing, are especially vulnerable to reduced calories and a lack of good nutrition. We sacrifice hungry children on the altar of whatever budget priority nudged out food funding.

As temperatures rise, as ice caps melt, as rainforests are destroyed, as the diversity of species diminishes, and as we choose not to take actions to try and protect our planet, we sacrifice the world our children will inherit on the altar of corporate profits, political inaction, and the personal costs and inconvenience in making changes.

When we don't pursue justice for the children who were — who are — being sex trafficked, we sacrifice their health and well-being on the altar of protecting the reputations, fortunes, and careers of those who prey on them.

Every generation, it seems, convinces itself that something precious must be sacrificed so that something else can be secured, like wealth, market share, status, power, guns. Who or what is it that we're willing to sacrifice — who or what are we willing to lay

upon the altar — to keep those things? Children? The poor? Immigrants? LGBTQ+ folks? Democratic ideals? Public education and affordable healthcare? The environment?

Elie Wiesel, in reflecting on this epic tale of the Akedah, wrote: “One imposes suffering on a friend, a [child], in order to win who knows what battles, to prove who knows what theories, and in the end someone else pays the price — and that someone is almost always innocent. Once the injustice has been committed, it eludes our control.”² Which tells us that the time to act is *before* the suffering is imposed, before Abraham begins his 3-day trek with his son in tow.

I don’t know what the ancient Israelites, who passed on to us these stories, wanted us to take away from them. The author, Rob Bell, offers a theory; he writes, “Those stories containing senseless violence point out how senseless violence is.”³

Which brings me back again to horror and outrage. Perhaps those feelings aren’t barriers to understanding, but rather, a way in.

² Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, p. 94

³ Rob Bell, *What is the Bible?*, p. 124

What disturbs us reveals our moral commitments. Our outrage is a window into our loves. What we cannot bear to see tells us what we believe is sacred. What is it that's breaking our hearts? *Amen.*