

Text: Genesis 22:1-18

Title: Taking God's Tests

Location: Community Presbyterian Church, Celebration, FL

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Before I start this week's sermon I need to address an issue from last week's sermon...my present tennis partner wants people to know he is neither the good person with the bad theology nor the pot smoking porno watcher with good theology...he is a good living good theology kind of guy! (Except for when he beats me)

Well the kids just took their finals for the semester. Many of us had children studying hard to get A's so that they can go to college. As the kids strive to meet the standards of the educational system, I thought we would vicariously take a test—the test God gave Abraham being instructed to sacrifice his son.

Now with the exception of the parents of teenagers the rest of us gasp in horror at this passage. In seminary teachers interpreted this passage as Abraham being schizophrenic because surely God would not ask someone to do something so horrible. This is not a Bible passage that fits nicely onto a Hall mark card.

Imagine Mrs. Abraham's response when her son comes home and tells her Dad tied me up and was going to stab me to death with a knife. It is quite probable that Isaac was in therapy the better part of his life after this significant childhood trauma.

The context of the story is God calls Abraham to execute his son to test his faith. Surprisingly, this passage is used to comfort parents who have lost children. Harold Kushner in his book, *When bad things happen to good people*, cites the Talmud explaining the loss of a child as: a potter who takes his pottery to the market place and in order to get people's attention and show how valuable and strong his pots are--will hit one with a stick. Of course the potter is not going to take a flimsy pot because it might shatter which would not be good for business. But he finds the strongest pot and hits it in the most fortified location. So the teaching is that God will test the strongest among us. Therefore, if you have come through a time of trial and suffering, it's because God realizes how strong you are.

This is a difficult spin on the passage. One mother who lost a child cried, if only I had been a weaker person Robby would still be alive.

The concept of our life being a test is not good news. Especially since most people in a time of severe grief and testing fall flat on their face.

A popular passage is 1 Cor. 10:13 The Lord will not test you beyond your strength. This vs. has caused much pain as people who are crushed by life, hear the trite reminder God isn't going to give you more than you can handle. Suddenly God becomes a foe not a friend.

Reality is individuals are tested and tempted beyond their strength regularly. This passage is not to be understood in terms of the toughness of our faith.

But why would God ask Abraham to do such a thing? The religious practice of the pagans was to sacrifice their children to their demon god's. So was God testing to see if Abraham was willing to be as devoted to Him as the heathen were to their idols?

It is possible that God was showing His people that He does not want us to sacrifice our children to Him and thus stopped Abraham to teach this lesson that God does not require murder to test our devotion.

Sacrificing Isaac was not a regression into the paganism of his day. The heathen's sacrificed their children to manipulate their god's in order to receive a blessing on their land. Yahweh is teaching Abraham that he is to live off of God's promises...that Abraham cannot merit God's favor or deserve it by his devotion. Only faith in God's promises. Abraham believed God would fulfill His promise about Isaac so even though sacrificing Isaac didn't make sense, Abraham trusted. We learn in Hebrews that Abraham assumed God would raise Isaac from the dead.

There is a tendency when God blesses us to convolute the gifts of God thinking that we have earned our blessings—we become entitled and start to think we deserve God's gifts by good behavior.

Father Abraham passed this test by his willingness to give back everything to the One who had given everything to him.

The Lord was saying to Abraham ultimately this boy is not yours, he is mine. I don't mean to be callous, you cannot say to a parent who has lost a child that the child was just like a video from Blockbuster rented for a short period of time.

This is important because many parents worry about their kids who have not followed in the footsteps of their church upbringing. I'm worrying about my son's grades because if he doesn't get good grades he might not go to college and even if he does, can I afford it? So he has to get good grades or he won't go to college and then he'll not get a good job and his life will be ruined and ahhhh... suddenly God touches me on the shoulder, Uh William whose child is Elijah—technically he's yours... Oh, you mean I need to trust his future with you?

Michele had an experience with our son back when he was four years old; he asked Mom do you love me more than anything? She said yes. He continued even more than God? Michele didn't want to hurt his feelings and replied just as much as God.

Suddenly his face dropped as serious concern consumed him, Mom I'm your golden calf. I had been training him to love God more than even me or mommy.

Cults misapply Luke 14:22 Unless you hate your father and mother and family you cannot be my disciple. They use this verse to coerce their followers into severing ties with their families...overlooking the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment love you father and your mother.

I don't like to admit this in front of the men in our congregation but on Elijah's first day of school as I dropped him off and drove away I felt a sense of loss, as if I was leaving part of myself there and I had a little trouble seeing something in my eyes.

Yet it was a comfort to know that as I drove away I was leaving him with the One who is the Lord of life—comfort in knowing that his Lord was going to be with him and where I could not go God accompanied my child.

Reminding me he belongs to the Lord. So I entrust him to God's care. Yes he is a gift to me from God. Everything we have is a gift from God, but we must release it back to Him.

Let's put a Hollywood spin on our text. Yahweh is the God Father Don Vito Corleon, calling Abraham in: Abraham we got to test ya, I want you to put a hit on Isaac, I want you to rub him out, then we gonna make you part of the family.

Is that what it is all about God testing Abraham's loyalty by killing his son? Is God the judge in a courtroom measuring the evidence of our commitment and on the basis of the evidence—rendering a verdict? A cosmic school teacher with a big red pencil marking up a test to give us a grade. Is Christianity one big test?

The fact of the matter is God is our judge. Thomas Jefferson said I fear for my nation when I consider that God is just. However, the biblical message is Abraham is an example that we cannot and do not earn our salvation. God has received us in Grace despite ourselves. While we were yet sinners Christ died for you. For those who think life is a test we flunked it going in. We have failed to such an extent that we should be banished from God's Holy presence because of our sinful nature. Yet in spite of us God has forgiven us and embraced us and included us. Jesus took God's test and passed it for us

Interesting Biblical dynamics are going on here. The first time the word love is used in the Bible is here in our passage, talking about a Father's love for his son. The first time the word love is used in Matthew Mark and Luke is when God says about Jesus, You are my beloved Son. The first time the word love is used in John The gospel of Love, is God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son. God did on the cross what He did not require Abraham to do.

In order to understand this text in our contemporary society we need to erase the way we perceive tests. Tests as we understand them are given for the benefit of the one giving the test. The department of Motor Vehicles wants to ensure safe highways so in order to do this they give every potential driver a test. On the basis of the test we know who should get a license and who should not. Whether it is the educational institution's admissions department or a corporation's human resource department the giver of the test acquires information to make their decision. Thus tests are for the benefit of the tester.

When C. S. Lewis went through the trauma of losing his loved one which he wrote about in his book a grief observed. He writes, They say these things take place to try us, but God has not been experimenting on my faith to try me. He knew the quality of my faith all along, it was I who did not know it. He always knew my temple was a house of cards. He made me realize it by knocking it down.

It is a new understanding that in our trials we are tested not for God's benefit, but for ours. We are the ones who have to discern the information and make a judgment about ourselves—who I am, where I am going and where I stand before God.

The test was not for God's benefit, but for Abraham's. Yes, the text says, Now I know about your love, but I'm sure the omniscient God knew all along. This is the first time the word obedience is used...when we are asked to do what doesn't make sense. We get all upset about God requesting a sacrifice, but you and I are called to be a living sacrifice dying to ourselves daily so God's will can be accomplished.

It was Abraham who came out of the test with a deeper understanding of God's goodness.

Testing is not from an angry self centered God testing us for His benefit, but God gives us tests for our benefit. Sometimes along the way we need to see the truth about who we are. In athletics you can have nice uniforms, learn all the plays and even have great practices. But at some point you have to play the game to find out how good you are. The unexamined life is not worth living.

At some point we have to face the truth about life. The bar stools of the world are filled with the hollow, bitter lives of people who have great dreams with illusions of how wonderful they are...how superior they are to the rest of the human race, but have never allowed themselves to be tested on the field of reality. So they sit on their bar stools and down one more drink to preserve the mythology of their greatness. They sit on the stool so that they will not be tested.

Stephen Carter in his book Integrity has said if we are never tested, we never know how deeply we believe.

God put Abraham to the test not only to give Abraham a clearer vision of who God was, but to allow Abraham to see who Abraham was. God uses the trials of life to give us a glimpse of who we really are and where we need to grow.

Often during our tests we learn things about ourselves that are not very good. But often we learn more from our failures...they can be a great catalyst to learn what is needed for us to grow.

Sometimes our tests are not for us but for others. There is a story about a tribe in Africa when missionaries came the tribe was curious about the validity of their message, so they decided to poison the various tribe members to see how the missionaries handled death. Slowly someone's wife would die and then one of the children and then another person and another. Finally after they had killed them all they affirmed that how the missionaries handled their trials confirmed their message and so they followed their Christ.

2 Cor. 13:5 says Examine yourselves to see if you are in the faith: Test yourselves. I had a test thrown at me recently; it came in the form of Haiti.

I've felt badly about the death and destruction...but not necessarily doing anything about it except praying. The Saturday Men's Bible Study group decided to take up a collection to give to one of our members Hugh Lackey who is going there tomorrow because he already has a ministry in Haiti. We called Hugh and asked what are you going to do with the money? He said the survivors have no food or water. No place to sleep. He's going there to bring water, food and blankets do something about the suffering. Our Sat. morning Men's group asked the elders if we could invite you the congregation to participate. If you want to we have placed a basket for on your way out. If you want to give but don't have the resources with you—drop a note with your pledge on it and bring it next week.

I am not trying to guilt you into giving...we all have charities we give to an others we do not. But if you wanted to do something about Haiti and haven't yet here is your chance.

Let's pass the Jesus test: when did I see you hungry or thirsty or naked or hurting and take care of your needs.

Greatly indebted to John Galloway and Henry Morris for sermon insights