

**Here I Am:
Showing Up for the Big Test**
Genesis 22:1-14

Good morning. I'm so glad to be here with you today again.

I've chosen a passage today that has a little history in my ministry. This passage, Genesis 22:1-14, is the first text I ever preached on. It was 36 years ago. I was a seminary intern and it was my very first time preaching for a congregation. I was nervous as all get out, and it turns out that I even skipped a whole page, I just flipped two pages at once, and kept going. And so the mental track was, 'wait, something's not right here.' Anyway, it was a disaster. So, I consider this a do-over after all these years.

I want to acknowledge that, in fact, *it is* a difficult passage. And it's probably why I haven't preached on it again since then! I've taught it as I've taught the book of Genesis, but I've never preached a sermon on Genesis 22 again. We have to admit: it's a tough story, and the Church throughout the ages has struggled with the lessons we are to draw.

What are those lessons? and most especially What kind of God would ask such a thing, of someone following him? As we enter into this story, we acknowledge the horror it causes within us that God was asking Abraham to kill his own son, and some indignation that God would ask this of anyone, right? I want to acknowledge those feelings, but I want to move past them to get to why this account is in the Bible.

In a nutshell, what I want you to take away this morning is this: In the hardest, most confusing moments of life, God gives us both challenge and comfort. His challenge invites our loyalty and stretches our trust. His comfort renews our confidence and hope. Today, we're going to plow through the challenges this passage highlights until we get to the confidence and hope part.

Looking at this passage, there are three particular threads running through the story. I derive this from the text in which three phrases, or concepts, are repeated. Three concepts are woven through this passage, and those repetitions indicate a thread to follow.

The three themes are found in Abraham's encounter with God. The first is the "Here I am" thread. When God calls out to him first in verse one, Abraham responds,

"Here I am." And then when Isaac starts to wonder what the heck is going on here, Abraham is fully present to his son, saying, "Here I am, my son." And thirdly, when God intervenes at the very end, "Abraham, Abraham!" once again Abraham responds, "Here I am." We get this sense, that while trying to stay in touch with his son Isaac, Abraham is very much staying in touch and is fully present and showing up when God calls upon him. So, Abraham is present to God, and willing to trust him even with the unthinkable—that's the first thread.

The second thread is this idea that we're dealing with his son, his *only* son. Isaac is Abraham's most precious possession, if you want to call him that, and the fulfillment of God's promises of progeny. Isaac represented a dream and a future that was planted in Abraham's mind maybe 30 to 40 years ago when Sarah was barren and they were childless. And now here is the long-awaited Isaac, maybe in his early teens, who has become Abraham's son of promise. God had promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations that he would have so many more progeny than stars in the sky. So what God is asking of Abraham on Mount Moriah is cutting to the very core of Abraham's being—asking something of him that is virtually unthinkable and confusing and seemingly contradictory.

The third thread is the worship thread. And this is where the whole point of this exercise is: Whom will you worship? Abraham is going to worship God by giving a sacrifice. And he is aware that God is going to ask him to sacrifice his son. What drives Abraham ahead is awareness that the impending sacrifice is an act of worship, and as such an act of faith and trust in God. We observe, with our hearts pounding, that he trusts God. What does he say in verse 9? Abraham says to those accompanying him, we will go up to the mountain and worship and then *we* will come back to you. You can't help but think that Abraham at this moment is believing that if he kills his son, God will raise him back from the dead. The basis for that faith is only what he has seen God do already in working miracles. It is as if he is saying, "I will follow through on this weird command, but I'm expecting you, Lord, to be glorified in some spectacular way, namely, by the resurrection of Isaac, and the undoing of what I do here." So, Abraham is blindly trusting God's purposes. What do you suppose he is thinking about as he goes up that mountain? "Okay, Lord, I don't know what why you're asking me to do this. I'm going to trust you. I'm just going to keep going."

It reminds me of a famous quote of Martin Luther King, Jr. who said that "Faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase." And I can just see Abraham climbing that mountain in faith not knowing where it's going to lead.

But let's not forget to look at this story from Isaac's perspective. Now he's old enough to know how sacrifices are supposed go. He understands that when you give a sacrifice,

you bring your animal to the altar with you. But in this case, there is no animal. So he expresses a little bit of his concern here, right? He asks, "Where is the lamb that we're going to offer?" And Abraham says, "God will himself provide the lamb, so don't worry." They keep on going and Isaac's looking around, wondering: we're going on a mountain where there's not a whole lot of sheep. I don't know. I mean, I just can't even imagine.

I *can* imagine though, because I had a friend who joined the Peace Corps in the late 1990s and went to Zambia. Beth is her name. She was a new Peace Corps volunteer and getting settled in a little village called Kabilwili about 26 kilometers from civilization. The ladies of the village came to her hut to prepare a welcome meal. Beth had been learning the local language, which is Nyanja. She's still, you know, testing out her wings in that new language and trying to keep up with the ladies' conversation. They're laughing and giggling and having fun and they're talking about preparing *mzungu* for dinner. Now, the Nyanja word *mzungu* means "white person." And Beth doesn't know, wasn't aware that this might be a cannibalistic tribe. Her anxiety rises just like Isaac's must have done. Where is the *mzungu*? Where is the meat for the meal? Where is the lamb for the sacrifice.

Okay. Finally, what happened was that someone brought in a great big pumpkin and said here's the what Beth had heard as *mzungu* but the word is actually *dzungu* with a D at the beginning, which means "pumpkin"! All along they were saying pumpkin was for dinner, but she couldn't hear the difference between those two words in her fledgling Nyanja. So that anxiety that built all afternoon while they were preparing the meal, "Am I the one who's going to be eaten?" Is exactly the idea here in Isaac's mind, "Am I the one who is going to be sacrificed?" And of course, his great feeling at the end of the story is tremendous relief, and giving praise to God.

The third perspective, obviously, is God's perspective. At the very beginning of the passage, it says, "after these things God tested Abraham." What we gleaned from that verse is that God and Abraham have history, they've got decades of history. And part of that history is certainly God's faithfulness in providing Isaac. But there was a little bit of doubt, I think, in God's mind, because you recall that Abraham has, you know, gone before Pharaoh and fudged a little bit on what the circumstances were, claiming that his wife Sarah was actually his sister, and that sort of thing. And so what does God want to test in Abraham? What does he really want to know about Abraham? I think what he wants to know is whether Abraham's faith in this God, Yahweh God is real, and central to his life.

Now, in the process of this story, Abraham learns that God is indeed trustworthy. And all that he has ultimately belongs to God. He's willing to give back anything because he

believes anything he has is God's. God learned that Abraham truly feared God, he was reaching for the knife for heaven's sakes. And once convinced of that, God stopped Abraham— intervened— because God abhorred child sacrifice [this we must say, and it became part of the Levitical law that you cannot sacrifice any child, to any god.] So this whole scenario was not to appease God. That's not what God was looking for. That's how pagans would see it. No, his objective was to discern the existence of Abraham's love and loyalty toward him. And from God's perspective, Abraham passed the test.

But what a test! Why this particular test? If the test were merely one of observing Abraham's willingness to let go of some thing or a loved one, God could have struck Isaac with lightning and taken him himself. But that's not what happens in this story. God asks Abraham to do the killing—Horrible, I know—but stay with it. God was looking for an indication from Abraham, that Abraham himself willingly put God first in his life and not this cherished, long awaited son.

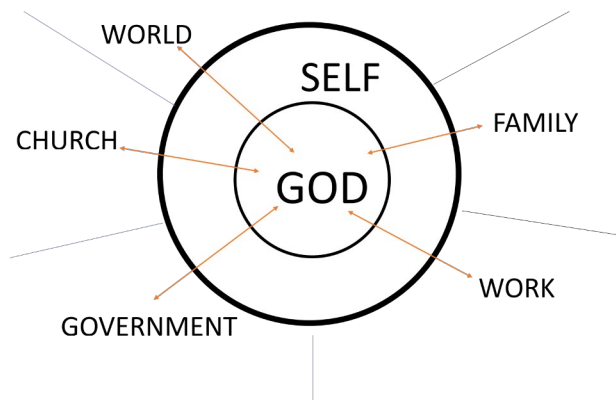
At this point, we've got to stop for a second and process those times in our own lives when we have been asked to give up something we hold dear. A career dream, maybe the prospect of having children, maybe admittance to a particular school, maybe money we've saved for retirement. I'm thinking of Scrooge here . . . Whatever we hold dearest, is the thing or the person most likely to be God's biggest competition in your life. Competition for your loyalty, for your worship, and that is then an idol.

Be prepared to be challenged on this point: Is the center of your universe, your children, or your grandchildren, or your spouse, your nest egg, or something else, you'd sacrifice everything else to keep? God is big, and good enough to demand our deepest loyalty and devotion—because God alone is worthy of our worship and ultimate obedience.

God is not saying your child is less worthy of your love. Because after all, you have parental responsibilities. But God is saying that any love object you have can only be put in proper perspective if God is at the center of your life! This is the challenge. It's a choice you and I make every day: who will be the center of my life around which everything else rotates?

As a young Christian, I was taught to love God first and foremost. And then in this order, love your family, your work, your church and the world, there was a list, it was a line, a checklist. And, and so, you know, put your priorities in the right place, God comes first. Well, the problem with this linear approach is that it's hard to check off the first box. When have I loved God enough to say, "Okay, I've done that. Now I move to the next thing on the list."

I think it is more helpful and biblically responsible to look at our lives in a circle with God at the center.



We have the dark circle which is myself, with God at the center. And then all these other aspects of my life, like my responsibilities and concerns are outward moving from that. When God is at the center, all those things can stay where they belong, in proper order and perspective around God. If we're living what Richard Foster calls the "with-God-life," empowered by God's love and motivated by God's purposes, then being devoted to God enables us to love our families, our work, our influence in the world without idolizing them. And that's the key. In every relationship we have, we have the opportunity to step up, to be present to the challenge, and to show that we trust God, believe in God, honor God and follow God's footsteps, as we execute our responsibilities in those other areas. And then by turn, God works through us to help us fulfill our obligations to family, work, church, etc.

Remember, I said at the very beginning, that this story presents both a challenge and a comfort to us? Well, what is that great comfort? If—or I should say, when—God were to test our faith, through some deep, low period in our lives, where we are called upon to let go of something important to us? Could we go into that experience somehow feeling good about it? On what basis could we know that God is indeed trustworthy and that following God's will is still the best option?

To derive an answer to this important question, we must rest on two foundations of our faith. The first one is that God is good. God is not capricious, God is not abusive, or subversive. God is good. And second of all, God gave his only Son—his own son, whom he cherished—for the good of the whole world. And he never asked us to do what he himself is unable or unwilling to do. God knows what Abraham went through. And we know this from the book of Romans, chapter three, "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold or spare his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him, also give us everything else?" So, this side of the cross, we understand that God gave his only Son. God did, in fact, provide the lamb. That would be the only perfect sacrifice any of us could offer God.

So right there, that's the link to the Gospel. Jesus has indeed provided the lamb and opened the door to full, unhindered fellowship with himself. To close, let me ask you if you can pray like Abraham, saying, "Here I am, Lord. I am ready to do your bidding. Here I am, Lord, I am willing to follow in your footsteps. Here I am, Lord, ready for the big test of my faith. Here I am, Lord, for worship. I will trust you to provide all that is needed for my life, to be completely dedicated to you. and mindful of my godly responsibilities in this life." I hope you can pray along with Abraham. That's the challenge, full of comfort and hope, ever since God provided the lamb. Amen.