

Are there any stories about the Bible you don't like? I have to be honest. Today's story is a really hard story. I can't really imagine anyone liking it. The first sentence gives us a clue – it says, "This is a test." Who likes a test? I think life would be much easier without tests. But that's not reality. Let's hear the story. (READ Gen 22:1-14)

Following this God spoke again and restated the promise. God said to Abraham, *it is through your obedience and devotion that the blessing will come true*. This is a shocking test. The thought repels us. It raises all kinds of objections. God wanted to know something. He was looking for something. God was examining Abraham's faith. The question is: does God still test us regarding our faith? If so, what does it look like?

When this test came, if Abraham had dared shared it with Sarah, we all know it would not have happened. In no way would she have stood for it. They would have probably gotten divorced. But it was a real event, a challenge of faith which demanded an agonizing decision on the part of Abraham, and he did not even argue with God. The book of James says, faith without works is dead, and Abraham's faith was marked by unquestioning obedience.

He got up early in the morning, cut the wood, packed what he needed, and was on his way, not stopping to reconsider for three days. Yet surely the struggle was there. This was the long-awaited son; the beloved son; possibly the second son whom Abraham would lose in a short period of time. We cannot imagine being asked to do such a thing.

Abraham, by taking that walk, showed this was not a "spur of the moment" thing. Although we don't know what he was thinking, we know he persisted in following the voice of God.

How are you doing at hearing and following the call of God? The nominating committee this year went through a process of prayer, seeking God's voice. Then they asked each person to pray and listen for God's direction on whether to say "yes" or "no" trusting God would lead each one of them.

So while Abraham walked, maybe he thought about the promises. Some Christians do focus on the God's promises of abundant life. You have heard of it, haven't you? Some label it the "prosperity gospel." We certainly need to seek God's miracles. Only, is that what knowing God is about – gain? That makes God into some sort of Santa Claus, doesn't it? It puts our relationship with God in the realm of *we ask, and God provides stuff*.

If we focus only on the promises we might individually claim, then we become consumers. But there is more to faith, isn't there? There are demands of faith and obedience, and there is the requirement of doing justice for people in need. So the promises were not the whole deal for Abraham. Otherwise he would have said, "No Lord, I must have misheard you. I will not sacrifice my son." And he would have never gone on that intentional three-day walk with Isaac.

I want to talk about this idea of reducing Christianity to only the promises of God, which is always a temptation. It happens by not taking Scripture as a whole. We must guard against concluding that faith means simply blessing. Faith means relationship and that means commitment, even to the point of sacrifice, even unto death.

Relationship with God was important to Abraham. He had heard the promises for a long time. He persisted in faith for 23 long years. He gave up another son for this one. It would be real easy for Isaac to be the “center” in Abraham’s life. But that was not the case. We can conclude, then, his primary concern was not the promises, but letting God call the shots.

Let’s consider the sign on the sanctuary wall. “Lord of all or not Lord at all.” Sounds very black and white, doesn’t it? Almost harsh. You might conclude that Abraham and we have to gut it through. Make God lord, that’s all God cares about domination; to take things away from us. Isn’t that what this is about? God was taking away Isaac. But I want to argue that believing God is “Lord of all” is a place of great security and a hopeful future, because believing it means God is capable of being lord.

But Abraham was not being dominated by God. It was Abraham’s choice to obey. Eugene Peterson says in *The Message* that Abraham “fearlessly feared the Lord.” That means he was fearless in his respect for God’s good intentions, even though the order God gave him seemed crazy. He learned God is good and generous, even when times are hard. As a result he stuck with God; he was committed all along the way. His commitment to God did not end when Isaac was born. It’s more than seeking a good life. The goal of the Christian is to trust God explicitly at all times, and believe that we are in safe hands, even when the unpredictable happens.

Abraham answered three times: “Here I am.” Remember how Adam hid from God in the Garden of Eden, after he and Eve ate the apple? Not Abraham. He is grounded in God. He’s present and ready to say “yes sir.” He obeys with ease, trusting the goodness of the Master. He does not dispute, delay, or resist. God learns Abraham truly believes God has a plan to bless Isaac.

Why would God give this test? This was no game with God; God genuinely wanted to know. We need to understand it matters to God how we act. Relationship involves authentic give and take. Relationships need to stand up under the test. Otherwise, our faith is theoretical, not real. It’s powerless and means nothing.

Do you think your actions and commitment matter to God and impact others? In my own life, when the door opened to go to seminary, it was not without cost. \$90,000 to be exact, which would certainly compromise retirement. I had to ask, is God Lord of All? Would God see me through? There was no certainty of the future; there still isn’t. But if God is “Lord of All” I have to trust that to say yes is the best position of shelter and protection and blessing.

But why should you see sacrifice as a position of shelter and protection? Because God provides.

Abraham allowed that “Lord of All” thing to flourish. He told Isaac, “God will provide,” even though he did not know how. He just knew it would work out and that God was trustworthy. Is that your experience with God? Or have you yet to try it?

The truth that Abraham experienced is that God makes demands. But, when God demands sacrifice from us, God always supplies God’s own substitution. God is able to be lord and is

good to His children. The real question for us is do we trust God with hard things? Do we risk it? That God is Lord of all, even the good and the bad?

We cling to many things. But these things are not really ours. The enemy tells us that God is not trustworthy. Abraham still witnesses to the fact that “God will see to it.”

Let’s ask ourselves, *am I listening to God with the intent of moving forward, whatever the cost? Or am I stalled out in complacency and fear?* God demands that we trust Him. How do we learn to trust that God will take care of it?

Perhaps if we realize God sees the big picture – not just the next 20 years, but the next 20 generations. God is involved in your life and in the Duncanville community and God will get us through the test of faith. But we must believe and trust; take the test, by acting on that faith.

Why should faith be tested? So we know what it’s like to have a Lord who is really capable of being Lord of all. Faith should be tested so we can hear God better as we go about growing as a church. So God is first, rather than our own “best laid plans.” Paul interprets this in this way: present yourselves as living sacrifices so that God can transform you and me into new people who actually know God.

Abraham was much stronger because of the test. He came through the fire tried as gold. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was faithfully committed to Isaac and the promises.

What is your Isaac? What do you need to sacrifice by faith? The promise is about God moving into our lives, loving us with God’s all. God asks us for the same. We are to bind all the things in life and give them to Him. We may not even know how to do so. Don’t worry. God will provide. He can do it and it’s a safe place. That’s the lesson. It’s about letting God take the lead, being Lord of All.

AMEN