

The Test
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
September 19, 2021

Genesis 21:1-3 & 22:1-14

Are you as horrified by this story today as I am? If not, maybe you should be. Dear God, it's awful. THIS is the Word of the Lord?

We can't even begin to relate to any sort of religion that would demand child sacrifice. Today we have no concept of what it means to participate in such a horrific act.

But this was the world that Abraham lived in.

It would not be unusual for him to watch his neighbors offer a child at the high place. In fact, there are other moments in scripture where God has to remind the Israelites that they are not to sacrifice their children... so the practice was definitely around.

At least we can say in this story that God was stopping it by saying no more! And that's fine.

However, I'm not sure I want to have a relationship with a deity who would ask me to climb up a mountain with my child, sharpen my knife, build a pyre onto which I have to do the unspeakable... I don't think you could ask me to do anything more repulsive.

That's not to say that you and I don't sacrifice our children to various gods every day (*metaphorically speaking, that is!*)

Depending on what is taught in our home... the things we deem important... our priorities... there are gods our children may be offered up to if we're not careful... whether that is the god of money or power, competition or consumerism, violence or prejudice.

I'm going to let that for you to think about on your own.

Some say this story isn't so much about a parent sacrificing his child, as it is about a man risking everything for his belief in God.

We know that Abraham had been given a promise that God would make him the father of multitudes... that many nations would come to be through him... that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and grains of sand on the seashore.

God promised that it would happen through Isaac.

For Abraham, Isaac represented a covenant, a promise. His son was the physical manifestation of God's plan... something he could turn to daily... a visible sign of the things to come...

For Abraham, Isaac represented security in the future of all that would come to be.

So maybe this moment of almost-sacrifice was more about answering the question of whether or not Abraham believed God was big enough to carry out the plan... even if Abraham destroyed the promise, the physical sign of the covenant, himself?

This was the test. God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. By doing so, he would potentially be throwing away all that God had promised.

So in that moment when Abraham demonstrated he trusted God enough to carry out the plan, he passed the test.

Abe was now ready to go on to the next step. He proved he could handle being the 'father of the multitudes' because he understood that everything he had, everything that he would ever have, was ultimately a gift from God.

It didn't belong to him. Isaac, the covenant, the promise, the future... didn't belong to him. It all belonged to God.

I still don't like it.

But I also concede that it is human nature to hold closest the things that are most dear to us.

We clutch our own Isaacs... the people, places or things that we think will bring us security, comfort and assurance. We see them as physical signs that we are protected and will be provided for into the future. We even thank God for blessing us with so much.

But then we grip that which we have so tightly held onto that they end up bound on our altar of choice. And our hands tremble when we think about giving any of it away.

I'm not talking about just money here. I'm also thinking about all our gifts, whatever God has given us... the time we spend teaching, caring for, listening to someone... the efforts we put into serving, helping and leading.

Sometimes we even hold our church community that way too, as we struggle to realize that none of it really belongs to us, it all belongs to God!

So we're left with a question... what is it that God has given us as a sign of promise, of the future, of security... that we don't want to part with?

What are the things near and dear to our hearts that are the most difficult to trust God with?

That's what this test is about. We have to be willing to give up part of who we think we are, and step into who God tells us to be.

To do that, we have to trust that God is bigger than what we can see... that God is able to do more than we can ask or think.

And is our God that big?

When Abraham knew he was speaking directly to God, he often talked back, he bargained, he asked questions. But this time, at the top of the mountain, he obeys the voice in silence. It's most uncharacteristic of his relationship with the divine up to this point.

I wonder if perhaps we are reading here the story of a human being testing the boundaries of the covenant. How different is this new God anyway? How meaningful is this promise?

In response, God puts a definitive end to the practice of human child sacrifice, grabbing Abraham's hand—and by extension, our hands too—and taking the knife away.

Because as it turns out, it is not okay for us to sacrifice one another on any altar.

Even when the voices of our many gods call out.

Make no mistake—there are plenty of voices we, like Abraham, think are perfectly reasonable. They ask us to sacrifice our children on the altar of prosperity, of national security, of morality. They ask us to sacrifice our children for the sake of our military reputation, our economy, our global power. They tell us it's okay to sacrifice some children, or some poor people, or some elderly people.

The voices are all around us. What's one more time? It's good for us, it's cost effective, and it'll be okay.

And so... the test:

The next time we are asked, will we listen to the voice of the One who says: *Give me the knife. It is not okay to sacrifice one another on any altar. Period. No more.*

I am a God of life, abundant life.

I am joy.

I am love and hope.

I am justice and peace.

My faithfulness is not contingent on yours... and that's a really good thing! Those other gods may have compelling voices, but their call always leads to destruction, and my call leads to life.

THAT is the word of the Lord, this I promise you. Amen.