

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
June 28, 2026 – The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's Old Testament lesson from the book of Genesis – the Sacrifice of Isaac – has captured the imagination of artists and taken hold of the minds of philosophers and religious thinkers for centuries. This is a story that cannot easily be put out of our minds. We find it deeply troubling, from its very beginning: "God tested Abraham." What kind of God "tests" a man by asking him to kill his son, the son he loves? How can we reconcile this lesson with the picture we have, also from scripture, of a loving, merciful God?

In modern times we read and hear this ancient biblical account about an event that happened 4,000 years ago from a modern perspective. Today a man who thought that God told him to kill his son and proceeded to carry out that command would be locked away and his son placed where he would be protected. We need to try to step away from our negative reactions to this story to appreciate what it means. But first know that the Hebrew people did not practice child sacrifice. They did attribute the practice of child sacrifice to their enemies who made such sacrifices to their gods (2 Kings 3:21-27).

On Sunday mornings we read short portions of the Bible, so we often hear only part of the "whole story" of a biblical character or event. Abraham's life story is told in the book of Genesis from chapter 11 to chapter 25. The story up to our reading today, briefly, is this. God called Abram to leave the land of his relatives and travel to a land which God would give to him, the "Promised Land" of Canaan. God promised to bless Abram and his descendants. Abram trusted God's promises, and he and his wife Sarai began a long journey without clear direction. During this journey God spoke to Abram and made a covenant with him. Abram's name was changed to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah. God instructed that male children be circumcised as a sign of this covenant. God also promised that Sarah would bear a son to Abraham, though they were old and Sarah was barren. Abraham had faith in God's promise. Sarah did give birth to a son in her old age, and he was named Isaac. So far and throughout the account of Abram/Abraham, he trusted God to do what God promised and he was obedient to God's commands.

The passage we read this morning is another and ultimate "test" of Abraham's faith and obedience. God asked Abraham to sacrifice to God the son God had promised to Abraham, the son Abraham loved. God asked Abraham to do what the Hebrew people did not do – human sacrifice – to do what the enemies of the Hebrew people did for their false gods. There were deep layers of meaning to God's command to Abraham.

As we heard earlier, Abraham did what God commanded him to do and took his beloved son Isaac to be sacrificed. When Abraham was about to kill Isaac, an angel of God stopped him. God had been convinced that Abraham "feared" – respected and revered are better words than feared – that Abraham revered God completely, even in this ultimate test of faith. A ram was supplied for the sacrifice in Isaac's place. "So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide.'" We may note that by sparing Isaac God was keeping God's part of his covenant with Abraham, to make great nations of his descendants.

The passage we heard is not, in fact, the end of this story in Genesis. The angel of the Lord went on speaking to Abraham: "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make

your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore ... because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:16-18). God blesses Abraham abundantly because of his obedience and his faith. Remember that obedience and faith are about trust in God and God's promises.

I'd like to make a few general points about reading scripture, especially for Christians reading the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. We cannot think that every account is literally, historically true. We need to try to understand what we read from the point of view of the people who lived when the writing was done, in their culture, not ours. We can expect to see things differently than people who lived 4,000 to 2,000 years ago, when human culture and experience were exceedingly different from ours. We ought not to think that the moral behavior exhibited by persons – even persons who are blessed by God, such as King David – is meant to be an example to follow. We ought to remember that human beings wrote as human beings and may have attributed to God interventions into history and human life that we cannot accept as the work of God, in view of both other contradictory messages in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

All that said, how might this long account of the life of Abraham have relevance for us? Many people are comfortable with the idea and the language of God testing human beings in the way God tested Abraham. I'm not comfortable with that idea or language, and you may not be either. But I do think that many of us, perhaps most of us, come to points in our lives when we must make difficult choices, sacrifices perhaps, to live out our faith in God. We find ourselves in a situation of crisis – it may be an abrupt, one-time decision to make or it may be a decision to act in faith over an extended period of time. What we choose will be in line with God's way or it will not. Often such decisions are very difficult and demand considerable self-sacrifice. In these crises we may have the vision and strength to act on the basis of our faith, but we may not. If we fail to choose God's way, we are called to "repent and return to the Lord," as we promise in our baptismal covenant. To "repent and return to the Lord" with faith and trust in God's promise of mercy, forgiveness, and welcome for those who turn back to God.

The account of Abraham that we heard today might also lead us to think about our lives in terms of how we have experienced God providing for us when we most needed God's help. Sometimes we may have recognized God's provision immediately, as Abraham did when he saw the ram in the thicket. Sometimes we only recognize how God has provided for us long after our most difficult trials. We often need the perspective of time to see God's mysterious work. I suggest that you spend some time in thought and in prayer to review your life with the goal of identifying the times when the Lord has provided for you. Review these times with thanksgiving to God. Let the memories build your trust in God and give you hope for the future.

In the church we are called to follow Jesus, who said, "take up the cross and follow me" and who taught that those who lose their life for the Lord's sake are those who find life. The Christian life can be demanding and challenging, and it can be a struggle to keep trying to follow Jesus. That's one side of our experience as Christians. On the other hand, there are times when we see how simple the message of Jesus truly is – to love God and our neighbors as ourselves – and when we are able to act in accordance with our faith more simply and easily than we could ever imagine. When we are given the grace to see how often God does indeed provide us with what we need. When we see how abundantly God has blessed us. But whether the road is rough or smooth, in all times and conditions of life and Spirit, may we all walk in Jesus' way, loving God and trusting God's promises, now and forever. Amen.