
The Time of Trial

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 2 July 2023

Genesis 22:1-14 • Romans 6:12-23 • Matthew 10:40-42



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Today's story from Genesis is a most dramatic — and disturbing — story. It is disturbing because God asks such a hard thing from Abraham. God seems almost cruel in his actions, at least judged by human standards. He asks Abraham to sacrifice the one thing Abraham has been longing for for years: a son of his own begetting. For a hundred years, Abraham had no son, until his wife's slave, Hagar, bore one to him. But he still longed for a son by his wife Sarah. And God had promised this son to Abraham, as the first in a long line of descendants, who would eventually rival in number the stars in the sky and the dust of the earth. God told Abraham that his line would continue through Sarah's son, not through Hagar's. And it is Sarah's son Isaac, the child born of laughter, whom God asks Abraham to sacrifice.

One might first ask: Why would God kill the very boy through whom God intended to raise descendants to Abraham? God does not make promises lightly, and as we have discussed recently, God carries out his promises. It is not a question of possibility, as God could raise descendants in any way God chooses: but it seems inconsistent. If Abraham is to be the father of many nations, this is not a very good way to start, killing his only heir as a mere child. God cannot want Isaac dead; but we are reminded of God's favourite Job, whose family Satan destroyed with God's permission. You will recall that at the end of the story of Job God gives him another family to replace the one that was killed. And you might say that God intended Job to be the father of many nations too, since God gave him so many offspring — yet God let the first set of sons and daughters be killed, before ultimately replacing them. Had the angel not intervened, and had Abraham actually killed Isaac, we might assume God would give Abraham another son as a replacement.

If this seems cold and unfeeling, we must first consider that God is not like us. God sees the whole span of life of each person, from before birth to after death, and into the afterlife. God gives us life on earth, and reclaims us as his own at a time of God's choosing. In the case of Abraham and Isaac, God chooses Abraham as the instrument of Isaac's death, which from our point of view, is quite horrific — a father compelled to kill a son.

But let us look at Abraham and Isaac again. First, God calls to Abraham. He answers readily: "Here I am." God gives his instructions. Abraham's reply is not recorded, but his actions speak for him: he prepares to go to the mountain, and the next day, he goes. He does not argue, and I don't think that the lack of argument is just because the story is condensed. Abraham argued freely with God back in chapter 18, when God was planning to wipe out the wicked inhabitants of Sodom. Here, Abraham doesn't question God's order, perhaps because it is a direct order: "Abraham, do this thing." He travels for three days to get to the mountain, apparently determined to carry out God's order. He sets up the altar, binds his son, reaches for the knife — and then God stops him.

Remember what we have said recently about putting God first? Above parents, above children, above friends, above absolutely everyone? Abraham has taken this to heart. For Abraham, God is supreme and is to be obeyed without question. It is interesting to look at Isaac's reaction too — or lack of reaction, really. He asks in all innocence, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" and apparently makes no protest when his father binds him and lays him on top of the altar.

The trust of a child in a father, or mother, can be quite amazing. I've told you all, I think, how I first came to New Zealand, in a 40-foot sailboat from California, with my father, mother and older brother. I was 13 when my father came home one day, called us all together, and said, "We're going to take an exciting trip! A real adventure!" and then told us his idea of sailing around the world in a small sailboat.

I don't recall exactly what my reaction was. I think I was surprised, curious, wondering how all this would happen. We weren't a sailing family. We'd never had a boat, and I don't think my father had ever told me at that point about the little bit of sailing he had done as a boy. But I never questioned that we were going to do it; I was never afraid that my father couldn't do it, or that we would be in any danger. Part of that was probably the general invincibility of youth; but mostly it was that I trusted my father. My father always took good care of me, and in my eyes, he could do anything.

Now, Abraham has clearly impressed upon his son the importance of obedience and faith, and Isaac trusts him. His trust is an echo of Abraham's trust in his father — our God. And that is how God wants us all to be, trusting, having faith, depending on God for everything — for our very lives.

What we should take away from this story, then, is this focus on faith. The apostle Paul writes that “no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law” (Romans 3:20). Following the law, that is, the Ten Commandments, does not make us righteous, because we all fail in some way. All of us have sinned, and none of us follows the law perfectly. But God may make us righteous by his grace, through our faith. God tested Abraham in the most extreme way possible so that the only way Abraham could pass the test would be through his complete faith in God. God was establishing a family of mankind, beginning a long line of women and men who would love God and follow God. If the first man, the father, was not righteous, and could not be trusted to live in faith and initiate that teaching from father and mother to daughter and son that is so important, God's plan would not work. So God established with Abraham from the beginning that he must first honour and love God above everything else. As brutal as the test may seem to us, the stakes could not be higher, for God is all, and our faith in God is the most important thing in our lives.

In the prayer Jesus taught us, what we call the Lord's Prayer, we pray: “Save us from the time of trial.” The older version renders it: “Lead me not into temptation.” The early Christian martyrs, as well as the more modern ones, were and are brought to a time of trial — and it is their faith which brings them through it. And so we may pray, “Lord, increase our faith,” for faith is the greatest treasure God can give us, as well as the greatest response we can make to God. In Jesus' name. Amen.