

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Genesis 22-1-14

An Exercise in Trust

Trust is the bedrock to any relationship. Without trust there is no sure footing.

Today's Hebrew Bible passage comes from Genesis and brings us to one of the most challenging stories we encounter in Holy Scripture. Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis said of today's lesson -this is not a text for those thinking about the faith for the first time, THIS is a text for taking the believer deeper. (paraphrased from Preaching the Luminous Word, by Dr. Ellen Davis, page 6) Another scholar, Herbert O'Driscoll wrote, "To those who have only contempt for human faith in God, this passage provides the most wonderful ammunition." (The Word Today by Herbert O'Driscoll, page 35)

God puts Abraham to the test, and it is no small test.

Abraham and Sarah's story begins in Genesis 12 and takes up about half of the book; its climax occurs with today's lesson about ten chapters in and almost forty years after God's initial call to Abraham back at chapter 12.

The beginning mirrors the ending; In the beginning God says to Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (12:1). Abraham took Sarah and went. Trusting in God's command to go and the promise of greatness, he took to the wilderness of exile from all that was safe and known to him. He was setting out to uncharted territory with nothing to trust except the promise of God: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great" (12:2). With the promise of blessing came the command to leave everything of comfort that Abraham knew.

They wandered for years with no clear vision of seeing God's promise coming to fruition. They were not growing as a tribe. There were no descendants. They were getting old, and Sarah was still barren. How would a great nation grow with no offspring? With no new life?

But Abraham was steadfast.
Abraham was the example of faithfulness.

In Romans, Paul writes about Abraham with these words.

Abraham... in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he

considered his own body, which was already^[b] as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No *distrust* made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:16-22, NRSV)

Abraham believed and trusted in all that was promised. It was a huge promise of greatness, so one might question Abraham's trust. Was it just trust in the promises? It doesn't seem like it. All that God commanded, Abraham did so without hesitation. The command to circumcise everyone in the tribe. The command to leave all behind. All connection to the tribe that defined him as a person. And to remain true even when there was no clear sign as to exactly how he was going to bear up a great nation. That is a whole lotta trust.

But By chapter 18 in the Abrahamic story the promise of an heir, a son, finally comes to Sarah and Abraham at the old age of almost a hundred. Isaac is born and the great nation named Israel is birthed into being. A lifetime of **trust** and faith is rewarded. At last there are signs of God's promise. No longer just words.

Things are good. Abraham and Sarah are parents. They have an heir.

And then BAM! Today's passage lands into the story and sends us reeling.

The passage opens with God testing Abraham. God calls out and Abraham without pause says, "HERE I AM."

Here's the test...

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you. (22:1)

What? Abraham has waited all this time for an heir from God, and now God is saying to kill him with no reason? Without making a case for why this is maybe necessary? It doesn't make any sense. And why is God testing Abraham? Is it because he and Sarah sent Hagar and Ishmael away? Is this a punitive action from God, because Abraham hasn't been faithful enough? It doesn't tell us. We aren't sure.

For decades Abraham has faithfully waited. We have seen the joy of the birth of Isaac. *But it now appears that God is the one in need of assuring trust.* We see so clearly Abraham's trust, but God maybe isn't so sure of Abraham?

In fairness, everything rests on this covenant between God and Abraham. This is the covenant that sets a faithful people in motion. If this covenant doesn't hold, what is there of the relationship between the divine and all of humanity?

In chapter 12 Abraham was asked to cut himself off from his *past* by leaving everything behind, but here in chapter 22, God appears to be asking Abraham now to cut himself off from the *future*.

On one level there is the devastating personal loss of his only beloved son, of his family. But it is not only his family future that is at stake here. On another level, it is the salvation of the whole world, because that is what God has promised will happen through Abraham's son, Isaac. Abraham has lived for decades with the trust that God was going to use Abraham's faithfulness to bless all generations to come. Now God is asking him to wipe that blessing out by sacrificing his beloved son.

And Abraham's Reaction? "HERE I AM!"

Abraham is the embodiment of radical trust. A trust that is willing to put God before EVERYTHING. Before EVERYONE. He says the words, HERE I AM, not once, but three times in the words we read today. When God Calls and says take your only son up to the mount of Moriah as a burnt offering, Abraham says, "HERE I AM!" He packs his bags and heads out. There isn't any description of his emotions, only the clear swift action taken.

And as they go along making their way to the mount, Isaac looks up and says, Father!" And Abraham again says, "HERE I AM, my son." Isaac goes on to observantly ask, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"⁸ Abraham says, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Ah-ha! There it is! Those four little words that hold the depth and breadth of this radical trust. Pointing us back to the passage in Romans that lifts up Abraham's abiding belief in God to bring life from death and the ability to bring into existence that which never was.

God. Himself. Will. Provide.

It doesn't get any clearer.

And after a three-day journey Isaac and Abraham approach the Mount of Moriah, we hold our breath. This is the nail-biting moment. You can feel the tension that must be mounting and the devastation of a father called to sacrifice his beloved. The altar is built and Isaac is bound, and the knife is raised! NO! is all you can think as you read the words and cover your eyes.

And then, in the horrific shock of the moment, the angel of the Lord speaks, "Abraham! Abraham!" and for a third time the response from Abraham is a resounding, "HERE I AM!"

The angel goes on, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.” (22:11-14, NRSV)

For now I know that you fear God since you have not withheld your son.

This says something important to the reader. The testing by God was not for sheer pleasure of watching Abraham squirm. God really didn't *know* if Abraham could be fully trusted. It was a test for God to build God's own trust.

Again, trust is the bedrock to every relationship.

One wonders is this text more about Abraham's trust or God's? Either way, we see that in that final moment God stepped in and provided a substitute for the offering of Isaac in the ram. It turns out that Abraham's faith was indeed not rooted in only the blessings of prosperity and promises of God but also in the hard commands and tests. His faith was and continued to be rooted in his abiding radical trust. Even if it produced suffering and sacrifice. And, in the end, God showed mercy and did not push Abraham any further to prove his trust.

Throughout the ages the story of Abraham has been an important one for those whose faith is tested by tragic and challenging events, when there is nothing remaining to hang on to except the witness of all those who have gone before us who also knew great suffering and yet held strong to their trust in God. Abraham, who trusted completely in the God who “raises the dead and calls into being the things that do not exist,” shows that trust is asked not only in the promises, but in the trials and tribulations of life.

GOD. WILL. PROVIDE.

We see it over and over in our faith story.

In the HERE I AM of Moses to lead his people out of bondage. God provided safety.

In the HERE I AM of Isaiah to be sent. God provided a way forward.

In the HERE I AM of Mary to carry the Divine. God provided a way to come among us in the life of Jesus.

God will provide now takes on even more meaning. *God provided us Jesus.* The promise and blessing of the divine to be among us and to transform us. And to love us completely. God provided the ultimate promise and sacrifice in the incarnate Christ.

And then the tables were turned. Humanity became the *tester*. God's promise of hope and love was rejected over and over again. God's love was tested over and over. Fear over shadowed trust. Jesus, like Isaac, climbed the mount and hung on the cross as an offering for the whole of the world. There was no substitute for God's beloved son and only son.

And still, GOD. PROVIDED.

God triumphed over death.
God brought death to life.
And God said I still love you.
I will not only love you in your faithfulness.
I will love you in your brokenness and even in your rejections.
I choose you.
I am here.

And what do we say?

We say right back, HERE I AM!

Amen.