

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

The idea that God would test a man by asking him to sacrifice his son is utterly distasteful. It is a horrific tale so far beyond comprehension that at face value it can cause us to ask, 'Is this really the kind of God I want to be associated with?' A God who asks for infanticide! But digging deeper into the narrative that has already unfolded for Abraham, the extent of what he is asked to do goes far beyond this. Abraham was an elderly man and in ancient times the future and hope of a person was intricately tied to having children, particularly sons.

This story, named by Christians "the sacrifice of Isaac" and by Jews "the akedah" (the "binding" of Isaac), has been the source of much heated debate for centuries. Is it a story of an abusive God, a misguided Abraham, religious violence at its worst? Or is it a story of faith and obedience, or perhaps even something else?

The akedah is a complex foundational story for Judaism and Christianity alike. In the history of Christian interpretation, this Genesis story has continued to be understood as a story of faith against all odds, and as a foreshadowing of God's self-giving in Jesus Christ.

This story has gripped the religious imagination of Jew and Christian alike for thousands of years. The story begins: "After these things God tested Abraham." And what do "these things" include? God's call to Abraham to go to a land he has never seen; God's promise to Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation; the long years of Sarah's barrenness; the birth of Ishmael; and at long last, the impossible

birth of the boy they call “Laughter.”

Then Abraham, at Sarah’s insistence, with great sorrow, casts out his first son, Ishmael. And now, God demands a most horrible thing: “Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.” The rabbis imagine the scene this way:

God said, “Take your son.” And Abraham said, “I have two sons.” He answered him, “Your only son.” He said to him, “Each is the only son of his mother.” God said, “The one whom you love.” Abraham replied, “Is there any limit to a father’s love?” God answered, “Isaac.”

The Hebrew prose of this story is beautiful and succinct. Abraham does what God demands, and sets out with his son. Abraham doesn’t say much. Isaac says even less, and one is left to imagine what they are thinking and feeling. The narrator uses repetition to heighten the poignancy: “The two of them walked on together”, as the father and son walk together in silence on the third day. Together in purpose, together in love. The narrator continually emphasizes the relationship between the two, as if we need to be reminded: “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac.” “Isaac said to Abraham his father, “My father!” and he said, “Here I am, my son.”

“Here I am” – in Hebrew hineni. It’s the same word Abraham used to answer God’s call in the opening verse: “Here I am.” Abraham is attentive to God, and

equally attentive to his beloved son. Here I am.

And Isaac says, “See, we have fire, and wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” And Abraham, heart torn in two, says, “God will see to the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And, again, “The two of them walked on together.” Whether Isaac knew what was going to happen is a matter that the rabbis debated. Perhaps he did not, which makes Abraham’s pain all that much more acute. Perhaps he did, which makes Isaac, too, an example of great faith and obedience. The two of them walk on together, father and son, the son carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. The first century rabbis, with no connection to Christianity but with ample experience of Roman executions, said of this detail: “Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice like one who carries his own cross.”

They reach the place of sacrifice, and Abraham builds an altar. Again, as if we need to be reminded, the narrator emphasizes the relationship between father and son. “He bound his son Isaac ... Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.”

At that moment, the Lord calls to him with great urgency, “Abraham, Abraham!” This protest from heaven halts Abraham in the horrific act of slaughtering his own son. It is not God's intention that Isaac, the child of laughter and of delight for two elderly parents, should be killed or harmed in any way.

And Abraham replies for the third and final time in the story, hineni, “Here I am.” One can imagine that now his tone is one of unspeakable relief and hope. Then

God says, "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."

This is a genuine test for Abraham who is free to decide what he will do. God neither knows nor pre-ordains how Abraham will respond. Here one could argue that God imposes this one-time test on Abraham because God has risked everything on this one man, and God needs to know if he is truly faithful.

Abraham and his descendants are the means by which God has chosen to bless the whole world. And Abraham has not always proven to be up to the task: there was the wife-sister charade, and the Hagar-Ishmael episode. Now God needs to know whether Abraham is willing to give up the thing most precious to him in all the world, for the sake of being faithful to the God who gave him that gift in the first place. And Abraham passes this most excruciating of tests: "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

Then, as Abraham had told Isaac, God provides; God provides a ram to take the place of the beloved son. "So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide.' There is a word-play here. The Hebrew word (ra'ah) translated "provide" is literally the word for "seeing." So the last phrase can be translated, "On the mount of the Lord, he shall be seen." Both translations of "ra'ah" speak the truth about God's presence and God's providence. However, this divine providence that implies that God intervenes at the last moment, saving the child, is complex, particularly as the story asserts that God has caused the situation in the first place.

A key theme in this narrative that ties it to its larger literary context is the idea that the promise is being threatened. God's repeated promise to Abraham that he will be the father of a large nation was delayed for many, many years, before becoming the promise fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. A promise that, once again comes under severe threat, ironically from Godself who asks a most impossible thing of his servant, Abraham.

From this story emerges an image of God who is capricious – a God that is in contradiction with Godself and who seemingly draws a line through the promise God had made and fulfilled to Abraham. One moment this God is answering prayers and providing a long awaited child, and the next moment, this same God is ordering that the child be sacrificed.

This story has been understood by some as a rejection of child sacrifice, which was apparently practised at some points in Israelite history. The replacement of Isaac with a ram corresponds with a provision for the redemption of first-born sons, with the sacrifice of a sheep. In a later tradition, first-born humans were to be redeemed simply by the payment of five shekels of silver.

At the conclusion of the story, God affirms Abraham's willingness to sacrifice the son who had been the focus of the divine promise. Abraham appears to be rewarded for his unquestioning obedience. His descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the heaven and the sand of the sea because he did not withhold the only son destined to produce them.

Abraham is known as the father of faith within the three "Abrahamic" world religions - Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In an age threatened by religious extremism and violence in the name of God, Abraham's unquestioning obedience to God provides a dangerous model.

God's disturbing order that Abraham sacrifice Isaac presented as a test, begs the question: what kind of test was this? and did Abraham pass or fail? The test involves much more than Isaac's life. It involves Abraham having to give up on God's promise, connected to the miraculous birth of a son in his old age. God seems to want to destroy what he has slowly built up. Receiving a gift and being put to the test are often connected in the Bible. Any gift is in itself a test: will the person who receives it cling to the gift in itself or look beyond it to discover the person offering it?

Abraham passes the test. God told him: "You have not withheld from me...", that is, you did not cling jealously to the gift. So God confirms the faith of Abraham, who continued to search for the will of his God in the midst of this dark night.

Or perhaps God was simply curious to see if Abraham would resist his order to sacrifice the son of promise? Abraham had interceded and bargained with God to spare the wicked city of Sodom. But where are Abraham's words of protest and intercession on behalf of his own son? Where is his exercise of moral agency?

Is it possible that God was disappointed in Abraham's unquestioning obedience? God's last-minute intervention suggests that Abraham's response was

inadequate. Abraham may have deserved credit for his motivation and his devotion, but his behaviour called for swift correction in order to spare the child.

While Abraham's case represents an extreme, it is not unique. In today's world we are also called to discernment and accountability, as the well-being of children continues to be sacrificed. Neglect, violence, sexual abuse, poor education, homelessness, and hunger are among the many threats faced by children in our communities in Canada, in indigenous communities, and across the globe. Child labour and prostitution, diseases including HIV, rising food prices, and natural disasters related to global warming are further examples.

The challenges to children today are so enormous that addressing them will take the commitment of all three Abrahamic faiths, in cooperation with other people of good will. Just as the first-born Israelites were redeemed by the payment of five shekels of silver, children today will be spared only by a shift of budgetary priorities and the investment of adequate financial resources.

The precarious situation of children in today's world is a test for our faith, for our understanding of who God is and what God expects of us. Our daily decisions and our political commitments need to be made in light of God's attentiveness to the child and of his command "Don't lay your hand on the boy. Don't hurt him in any way." This challenging narrative, provides a witness that whenever violence against a child is halted and whenever the needs and well-being of children receive attention, God's presence can be found there.

One of the reasons Abraham's faith here is so astounding is that on other occasions when God had made such grave decisions Abraham had questioned God. When God sought to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and their dens of iniquity, Abraham had pleaded on their behalf. When Sarah told Abraham that Hagar and Ishmael were to be sent away Abraham was deeply distressed and questioned God.

While Abraham's faith is upheld in the letter to the Hebrews, "*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac ... He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead*", do we really want to have such a blind mechanical faith that when we hear God's voice we are obedient to the point of acting in such terrible ways? This makes us no different to those Christians who have placed bombs in abortion clinics or the terrorists who strap explosives to themselves and walk into crowded market places. How do we discern God's voice and differentiate it from other voices we may hear? The voice that many a murderer has claimed has spoken to them – go into this place, or that, and kill in my name! Is our faith so blind, so unquestioning, so obedient that it cannot discern the inherent evil in such actions?

These are disturbing questions, questions that cut us to the core and this very story has been enough for people to reject God and the Biblical witness because of these kinds of issues. Yet the Bible does contain the witness of God's love for the world, the coming of Jesus, the story of the covenant. If we are to accept the stories of faith the Bible tells, then we must, be able to give an account for the inclusion of the difficult passages of scripture just as much as we want to hold on to the

sentimental passages that fill us with warm, fuzzy feelings.

So, is there something that we are not seeing in the story? Is there something more at stake in the request of faithfulness by Abraham? What really hangs in the balance? Is there a different perspective? What hangs in the balance for Abraham is his son, Isaac. So with this in mind we have to look from the perspective of the other stakeholder in the test: God! What does God risk in this encounter? What do we learn about God?

In asking this unseemly act of Abraham, God puts at risk the very covenant he has entered into with Abraham, a covenant that began when he asked Abraham to leave his father's house. Old Testament scholar Terrence Fretheim reverses the questions as he asks: "Is this not only a test of Abraham's faith in God, but also of God's faith in Abraham?" God places the shape of God's own future in Abraham's hands, in the sense that Abraham's response will affect the next move that God makes... Something is at stake for God in this matter.

What is at stake for God is the covenant relationship and the possibility that what God has invested in by entering into covenant with Abraham will fail. The trust that Abraham exhibits - that God can work this situation out - ups the ante for God. Just as there is a lot riding on the outcome for Abraham, so too God is placed in the position of being tested - "can this God really be trusted", maybe even "should we love this God"?

In this story what Abraham will do appears to be unknown by God. Abraham

has genuine freedom to act as he will and what he does will have consequences. While we might have a sense of God predetermining things, this story indicates that God entrusts to human beings the freedom to respond to, or not, the commands God gives. God is no puppeteer pulling the strings. If Abraham did not have a choice, or if the all-knowing God knew what Abraham would do then the test was an absurd story, there was no real test just an expected outcome. This raises questions terms of human freedom and God's knowing. We have freedom in our choices and maybe the possibilities of our choices are unknown not simply to us but to God as well.

Another vital principle expressed here is the willingness of God to be vulnerable in the context of the freedom of human response. Ultimately this vulnerability is exposed in the story of Jesus of Nazareth in whom God was fully present yet at the same time was fully human. Jesus' resistance of temptation and choice to walk all the way to the cross involves real choice, a real risk. It could have gone otherwise. If this were not the case then it was all a charade. Ultimately God's choice of vulnerability leads to a response of rejection and condemnation – Jesus is betrayed, deserted, condemned and hung on the tree by human hands. While Abraham stayed the course and followed the command, when God becomes fully vulnerable in being one of us, human beings reject God.

The grace present in the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection is that while humanity rejects this God who is so freely vulnerable, God's choice is to renew the covenant and in Jesus bear that rejection so that we might remain with God in that promised relationship.

This is a difficult story. The story of the akedah makes a claim on us: All that we have, even our own lives and those of the ones most dear to us, belong ultimately to God, who gave them to us in the first place. The story of the akedah assures us that God will provide, that God will be present. And, of course, as generations of Christian interpreters have seen, it foreshadows the story that forms the foundation of Christian faith – the story of the death and resurrection of the beloved son, son of Abraham, son of David, Son of God.

Amen.