

I have some questions
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Testing, testing

Nearly everyone I know has had a bad dream about missing a test, not being prepared for a test, or oversleeping an alarm before a final exam. Sometimes these are recurring dreams that torment us. Tests weigh on us. Students ask teachers, when covering material, particularly at the end of the year, “will this be on the test?” In my classroom teaching days, I always took those questions as, “Do I really have to pay attention to this material?” and my answer was always, YES.

Genesis 22:1-14

After these things God *tested* Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ² He said, “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.” ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and

took the knife to kill^[a] his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "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." ¹³ 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,"^[b] as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."^[c]

The first line of our scripture passage today lets us in on a secret that Abraham does not seem to know, namely that what follows is a test. While during this passage Abraham is very much awake, this test could very well be described as a nightmare.

But before we hear that this is a test, we get the phrase, "after these things." I got to thinking about what these things were.

Which things might lead God to test Abraham?

Could it be that God was not quite sure what Abraham would do? Could God trust Abraham?

Did Abraham have faith in God?

Did Abraham believe that God would ask this of him?

This particular story is quite terrifying, and yet it is a pivotal passage in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faith traditions. We lift up Abraham as a man of great faith. We know it by the title of the "sacrifice of Isaac." Our Jewish brothers and sisters refer to it as the "binding of Isaac" or the *akedah*...meaning binding. Each year, on Rosh Hashanah or the Jewish New Years' service, the *akedah* is read, every year. They obviously have considered this story a very long time and we have a lot we can learn from them.

And yet, we don't like this story. We don't like to think about this story because there are some very difficult issues, and frankly we all like happier stories. I mean, how else do you explain the popularity of the Hallmark channel? (I will readily admit that I tune in during the month of December for a good heartwarming story...because we know it will all work out in the end...the couple will confess

their love; the holiday-themed failing business/town/event, etc. will be saved.) Today's passage would never be a movie on the Hallmark channel. It is way too tough.

Today's passage bookends the first call of God to Abraham from Genesis 12:

“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

In Genesis 12, God calls Abraham to a life of promise, a future.

Today's passage is anything but promise or future. God calls, but this call is about obedience to a horrific topic: child sacrifice. And not just child sacrifice, but a sacrifice of the future and seemingly all the covenants promised.

In the book of Genesis, God had made covenants before with other people. And being human, people did not follow through on their end of the bargain. God had relationships with people from the beginning, and all of them failed, at some time or another.

Adam and Eve were told to enjoy the fruit of all the trees in the Garden, except for one. But then they were tempted. Adam and Eve wondered, “why not enjoy that fruit?”

Cain and Abel, Noah and his children, all fallible humans.

For Abraham, over the course of Genesis, he has gone where God has called. And while Abraham has what God has asked, he seems to have waived in his actions a bit or at least taken a few matters into his own hands.

Earlier in Genesis, Abraham expresses his concern for his own personal well-being by allowing Sarah to be concubine for not one, but two different rulers. Did he trust God for his safety enough, or did he worry too much about the power of other rulers?

Abraham does get into conversations with God about protecting the lives of righteous folk who might live in Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham, you might remember, negotiates down from blasting the whole city off the face of the earth to, okay, if there are 10 righteous men God will not do it. Abraham is bold to speak up, but only sometimes it seems.

God tells Abraham, he will be a father of many nations, he doesn't wait for a child with Sarah, but goes ahead and has a child with Hagar, the household slave.

Abraham seems to have one thing in common with me: I am an impatient person. I want what I want, and I want it when I want it, which is usually very soon after I decide I want something.

Abraham wavers, hedges his bets and is impatient despite God making covenant after covenant with him, about his land and offspring promised for the future.

Ah but the future...how long do we have to wait? When we waited 9 years for children, it seemed like forever, but we were in our 20s and 30s, not past the age of child-bearing and waiting another 25 years.

But I really have some questions here.

I have a lot of questions.

First of all, Really God?

Why did you have the need to test Abraham?

Is this a test of obedience?

Of faith?

Just what in the heck is being tested?

God, you asked *what* of Abraham?

Why on earth did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his long-awaited son?

Why is a question we ask so often about things that just do not have an explanation. But we sure want to know why.

For us, the question may be:

was it something I have done?

Something I failed to do?

Then I am really curious about this three-day journey...

What was the journey like?

Did they go in silence or was there pleasant conversation?

Of course, how could Abraham talk in pleasantries when he knew what was coming?

Could you cut the tension with a knife?

What happened on the way?

What on earth was going on in Abraham's mind?

Why didn't Abraham question God?

Why was Abraham silent?

What kind of person responds as Abraham did, to a horrific ask, without protest?

Why didn't he protest, like he did about Sodom and Gomorrah?

We know he had a close enough relationship with God to bargain with his maker.

Why would he not speak up now?

Then I have questions about the family dynamics...

Why did they leave so early?

Was it to keep Sarah in the dark?

What did Sarah know about this?

What happened to the relationship between Abraham and Sarah?

Did Sarah forgive Abraham for nearly sacrificing her son?

Did Sarah ever speak to Abraham again?

Clues from the next chapters of Genesis tell us that following this story, the next thing we hear of Sarah is that she died, and Sarah lived 20 plus miles from Abraham at the time of her death in Hebron, while Abraham was living near Beer-sheba.

What was going on in Isaac's mind?

Did Abraham and Isaac ever speak again?

We do not have any further words in scripture exchanged by the two.

Could those relationships ever be repaired?

What was the family like after this whole thing?

Was there even a family after this whole thing?

What is Isaac's relationship with God?

At least we know his son had a relationship with God, wrestling with him.

Isaac, whose name means laughter, were you able to laugh again?

Then I have some questions, turning the story as a mirror to ourselves...

Could I have done given up my own child?

Does God test us in a particular way?

God asked Abraham to give up the thing he most cherished. So, if God is personal and comes to us each asking to relinquish that we hold most dear, so we can understand, so our understanding of what God wants from us grows too?

How does this story compare to other religions of the times? Did child sacrifice happen in those?

What comparison can we make between the story of Isaac binding and the sacrifice of Jesus?

Is God trustworthy?

What kind of God asks someone to kill their own child? Especially if this child was the long-awaited-for child of their old age?

Is this the God I am supposed to worship?

Does God ask too much of us?

How could I, or anyone, have such faith?

I have so many questions. I bet you do too. That's the thing about scripture...we learn from it and from each other when we ask those questions. I'm not really a fan of black and white issues when it comes to scripture; I live in the messy middle. But that is not to say we cannot learn a lot from the akedah, the story of Isaac's binding.

So, what are we supposed to take away from this story?

I think we hear that God is **in** this story because of the themes that appear elsewhere in scripture:

- God calls people by name, sometimes to uncomfortable things
- Powers of that holy number 3 – the number of times Abraham responds in this passage to questions asked of him, saying, “Here I am”
- On the third day...the sacrifice and the son being returned to life
- God provides
- The one who is to be sacrificed carries his own wood, the instrument of death, on his own back
 - Yet Isaac was unaware until almost at the last moment and we have no idea if he was a willing sacrifice.

Things we might learn:

God does not condone child sacrifice despite the call to Abraham, setting God’s people apart from their neighboring nations of the day.

Abraham was a man who trusted in God.

God does provide...a ram for the sacrifice this time.

God answers, not on our time, but just in time sometimes in unexpected ways.

Where is the **good news** here?

Why do we come back to the story of Genesis 22 over and over?

It speaks to our own questions about what faith requires and what God requires of us.

Micah 6:8 says it plainly, “What does the Lord require, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?”

Embodying and living this requirement is the fullest and highest expression of faith.

May we do so today and every day. Amen.