

13th Thursday of Ordinary Time I 2021

Genesis 22:1b-19

God put Abraham to the test. He called to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

Then God said: "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a burnt offering on a height that I will point out to you."

Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took with him his son Isaac, and two of his servants as well, and with the wood that he had cut for the burnt offering, set out for the place of which God had told him.

On the third day Abraham got sight of the place from afar. Then he said to his servants: "Both of you stay here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on over yonder. We will worship and then come back to you."

Thereupon Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac's shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife.

As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham: "Father!" he said. "Yes, son," he replied. Isaac continued, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

"Son," Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the sheep for the burnt offering."

Then the two continued going forward. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.

Next he tied up his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar.

Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the LORD's messenger called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" "Here I am," he answered. "Do not lay your hand on the boy," said the messenger. "Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me

your own beloved son."

As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.

Abraham named the site Yahweh-yireh; hence people now say, "On the mountain the LORD will see."

Again the LORD's messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said: "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son,

I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing -- all this because you obeyed my command."

Abraham then returned to his servants, and they set out together for Beer-sheba, where Abraham made his home.

Matthew 9:1-8

After entering a boat, Jesus made the crossing, and came into his own town. And there people brought to him a paralytic lying on a stretcher.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Courage, child, your sins are forgiven."

At that, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." Jesus knew what they were thinking, and said, "Why do you harbor evil thoughts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"— he then said to the paralytic, "Rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home."

He rose and went home.

When the crowds saw this they were struck with awe and glorified God who had given such authority to men.



“Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah.

There you shall offer him up as a burnt offering on a height that I will point out to you.”

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Cruel!

I’ve heard this Bible story repeatedly since my childhood. I’ve had pastors explain it. And yet, I still react with the same emotion. I’m aghast. This is repugnant. It is cruel.

One would think I’d be a little more desensitized over time. But since I’ve become a father and a grandfather, I’ve become ever more reactive to the divine command to offer one’s beloved child up as a sacrifice.

What kind of God is this? Where is the love?

Well, I have had to go to the commentaries to help me with this conundrum. This story of Abraham taking his beloved Isaac to Mt. Moriah is the latest of ten tests of Abraham’s faith.ⁱ

The Ancient Jewish Commentary (Midrash) lists the ten tests.ⁱⁱ

- 1. Being thrown into a furnace because of his belief in a single G-d;*
- 2. Leaving his birthplace, his country and his father's house,*
- 3. Famine in the land of Canaan and being forced to leave it;*
- 4. The oppression of Pharaoh by taking Sarah away from Abraham,*
- 5. The oppression of Avimelech by taking Sarah away from Abraham,*
- 6. The war against the militarily superior 4 kings to save Lot (his nephew),*
- 7. Taking Hagar in the hope of generating a son,*

8. *Circumcision in a very old age of 99,*
9. *Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael that was bad in the eyes of Abraham,*
10. *Akeidat [binding of] Yitzchak to be scarified on mount Moriah.*

Abraham is our father in faith. He is such a role model, that Christianity, Judaism and Islam all claim Abraham as their father in faith. But such faith has grown and deepened over Abraham's journey with God over time and through these tests.

And yet... his beloved son? Really?

It's not that Abraham has a cold heart towards others. Remember how he had argued with God to spare the residents of Sodom:

Then Abraham drew near and said: "Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous people in the city; would you really sweep away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people within it? (Gn 18:23-24)

Abraham continued his argument until God finally relented:

For the sake of the ten, he replied, I will not destroy it. (Gn 18:32)

There was no such argument to spare his beloved Isaac. Abraham just silently acquiesces.

Look at the above picture of Abraham and Isaac next to the pyre. I think the artist got it right. Look how adoringly Abraham is looking at his son. Look how young and innocent the boy looks. Can you feel the heartbreak? There is no cold heart here.

What is different about our historical perspective is that we understand that a child has a dignity and right to life as any person... from conception.

In ancient times, children were no less adored, but they were extensions of the father and mother. The equality of a wife certainly had a different interpretation from our 21st Century understanding, much of our current understanding coming from Jesus' preaching and ministry.

Isaac was God's ultimate gift to his faithful servant Abraham. Isaac was the promise of an everlasting legacy.

I will maintain my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout the ages as an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land in which you are now residing as aliens, the whole land of Canaan, as a permanent possession; and I will be their God. (Gn 17:7-8)

But, if the ultimate test of faith was to call for Abraham to offer up that which he cherished most in the world, what would that test call for? What would be Abraham's ultimate sacrifice?

Yes, that beautiful little boy.

Maybe I could second-guess the Scripture by theorizing that Abraham in his zeal misunderstood.

As a police officer, I have committed a few people for psychiatric examination who claimed to be commanded by God to cleanse or avenge (not so good for you and me).

One Sunday, I was just packing up after 7:00 AM briefing at Station 5 (W. North and Douglas Sts., Kalamazoo) when we got a call of a man with a sword at the downtown Cathedral Mass. I responded with 2 officers in back-up. We entered the narthex quietly and could see through some windows into the nave. There up front to the left, in front of the ambo was the young man. Mass was continuing. I entered using the pillars for concealment while my back-up stood ready to rush in an instant. The worshippers in the pew greeted me with eyes as big as a scared deer's.

I was able to position myself between the young man and the rest of the people and close enough to intervene should he rush the altar (aka the celebrant!)

The Mass concluded without incident and the church emptied just leaving the young man in the front pew. I casually approached the young man (actually faking it) and started a conversation.

He had found the sword and then heard a voice that he was to cleanse the world of evil. I elicited more conversation that clearly established the young man was having a mental health crisis and that other's safety was at risk. I was able to speak with the young man with words of encouragement. He accepted with good nature my transport to the local psychiatric hospital where I submitted for a 72-hour hold for evaluation. The probate judge would determine what would happen next.

I tell this story to let you know that I know what psychotic delusion looks like and sounds like. There is nothing in our Genesis account that looks or sounds like delusion.

I also have a rule that I go by: Scripture says what it means, and means what it says.

The staying of Abraham's knife-wielding hand did not come from a "coming to" from a delusional trance. The staying of his hand came from divine intervention.

God did not want Isaac's blood. God wanted Abraham's heart. It was only through abandoning all he cherished that Abraham was in a position to receive God's ultimate promise of love:

I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the

gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing -- all this because you obeyed my command.

This is Abraham's story. This is the foundational story for the world's Abrahamic faiths.

This is my story. Do I love like Abraham loves? Do I cherish like Abraham cherishes?

This is also God's story. The English RSV of the Bible translates Gn 22:16 as:

You have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only-begotten son.

How can we hear those words without thinking of God and **his** only-begotten Son?

Abraham, in faith, withheld nothing from his God. God, in love, withholds nothing from us. Through that sacrifice, death is conquered and love endures forever.

When we come to this altar. We join with Jesus' sacrifice for love of God and each other.

What is it that we cherish, that we withhold from God? It is in following Abraham, our father in faith, that we offer all to God and open our hearts for God to offer all to us.

That is what kind of God, our Father is. There is the love.

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ⁱ Mary Ann Getty, PhD, WHHJune2021, July 1; Franciscan Media

ⁱⁱ <https://www.yeshiva.co/midrash/25590>