

**September 19, 2021**

**Genesis 21:1-3, 22:1-14**

**What If He Failed?**

**Rev. Kelley L. Becker**

There was a song recorded by Christian artist Steve Green in the 80s called "Find Us Faithful." It's been a long time since I've thought about that song, but this week, it came back to me as I read the story of Abraham and Isaac.

This is the chorus:

O may all who come behind us

Find us faithful,

May the fire of our devotion

Light their way.

May the footprints that we leave,

Lead them to believe,

And the lives we live

Inspire them to obey.

O may all who come behind us

Find us faithful.

Christian tradition has held the life of Abraham up as a model of faithfulness. We have been taught that his story ought to inspire us to live faithful lives as well. And in fact, in Genesis we can easily find examples of Abraham's faithfulness in his story. In chapter 12, he heard God's call to pack up and move away from everything he knew, and he went. In chapter 15, in spite of his age and life experience, he believed God's promise that he would have as many descendants as there were stars in the sky. And in chapter 17, he even embraced the practice of circumcision as a sign of the covenant between the Hebrew people and God. Certainly, in many ways, all who have come behind Abraham have found him faithful.

In the Christian tradition, today's story has generally been framed as a test of Abraham's faithfulness, which most of us have been taught he passed with flying colors. I am going to ask us to consider a different reading today, one that focuses less on Abraham and more on the people affected by his actions and on what Abraham believed (and what we believe) about the character of God. I am going to ask you to consider, "What If He Failed?"

But first, let's figure out what's happened between Genesis 1, where we were last week, and Genesis 21 today. In the story of creation told in Genesis 1 we were reminded that, even when present circumstances seem to say otherwise, like when the world and our lives are chaotic, God can still be trusted. Just as the wind of God hovered over the chaos of our beginnings, God's spirit is in and around us, reminding us that we all belong to God, and that through creation, God is always working toward wholeness.

After the creation narratives, the storyline moves quickly through the drama of the first sibling rivalry between Cain and Abel, to the populating of the earth and the people coming together trying to become like gods by building a tower to reach the heavens in the story of the Tower of Babel. Next there was the flood when Noah's family and the animals floated in the ark and God realized that violence is never the remedy for violence. And with that, God committed to another path, offering the rainbow as a sign of that promise.

Soon after, the narrative picks up Abram's story. God calls Abram (who would later become Abraham) to leave his extended family and his home and go to a new-to-him land. Abram and his wife, Sarai (Sah-rye), who would later become Sarah, pack up and go, trusting God to guide them and provide what they most want: children. It's a long journey through foreign lands, different tribes and towns, difficulties and adventures, and through it all the constants were: God's promises of land and children.

As I mentioned before, Abraham has been put on a bit of a pedestal, but he and Sarah, like a lot of us, struggled to do the right thing sometimes. Sarah got impatient waiting for God to keep God's promises and insisted her handmaiden, Hagar, have intercourse with Abraham to conceive the promised heir. The birth of Ishmael was the result of their time together. And twice, throughout their travels, Abraham, to save his own life, put Sarah in danger by having her pretend to be his sister. Despite their doubt and their mistakes, in chapter 21, God's promise to Sarah and Abraham is finally fulfilled:

21 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. <sup>2</sup> Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. <sup>3</sup> Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

Following Isaac's birth, jealousy flared between Sarah and Hagar, Ishmael's mother. Sarah and Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, throwing them out of the house to fend for themselves in the desert. And that brings us to today's text in Genesis 22:

**22** After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup>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."

In just the first two verses, it is easy to understand why this story turns people off. It's an awful story right out of the gate. It begins with the narrator telling the reader that God was going to test Abraham. The text doesn't say why, but it makes sense that God, having put all of God's eggs in one basket, Abraham, God would want to be sure Abraham was the right choice. God called Abraham who responds with the Hebrew word, *hineni* (he-neigh-knee), which has been translated, "Here I am." Abraham's response is more than just, "Hey, God, I'm over here." It's more like, "God! I'm here for it, whatever you want, I am your guy." So, God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

One of the questions I've heard asked in relation to this story is, "What kind of a father would be willing to sacrifice his child?" Those of us who have been taught that this story is an example of extreme faithfulness, can only conclude the answer to that question is, a faithful one. A faithful father would be willing to sacrifice his son if God told him to do so. I wondered this week if I could find any evidence in our world today that this was true. And of course, I turned where we all turn when we have a serious question: Google.

When I did, I found story after story of fathers who killed their children. In my exhaustive search, I did not find one instance in which the fathers in the stories were described in positive ways. They were described using words like cruel, disturbed, ill, angry, addicted, or vengeful. Faithful was not used to describe any of them, even the ones who claimed they did it because God told them to. Yet, here we are.

<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup> 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.”

Abraham arose early that morning. I wonder why the storyteller thought we needed to know that detail. Maybe so we would imagine him quietly waking Isaac up and the two of them sneaking out of the house so he didn't have to tell Sarah where he was going. Can you imagine how that conversation would go? “God told you to do what? Well, you can tell God that is not happening.” One of the wonderful things about seminary is the opportunity to debate how we interpret biblical texts. I remember talking about this text and the absence of Sarah in the narrative. We joked that if Sarah had woken up and started asking questions, everything would have gone differently. Sarah isn't in this story, though, so let's get back to Abraham.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup> 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?” <sup>8</sup> Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

When Isaac called out to his father, Abraham once again answered *hineni*, (he-neigh-knee), this time in response to his son, “Isaac, I am fully present and here for whatever you need.” What he needed was to know where the lamb was. This is twice in the last few verses that Abraham has voiced either unwavering trust in God or just flat out lied. The first time was when he told the men they were with that he and Isaac would be back after they worshiped. The second, when he assured Isaac that God would provide the lamb. I listened to a podcast this week where two joked a bit about the way in which Abraham responded to Isaac, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Or “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering: my son. Either way, the two continued their walk.

<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. <sup>11</sup>But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>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."

And everyone lived happily ever after. No.

The angel, who should be understood here as the voice of God, calls out to Abraham, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he responded again, *hineni* (he-neigh-knee). "God, even now, I am fully present for you." And just as Abraham drew back his knife, God called it off. The test was over. He was, indeed, willing to sacrifice his son. Abraham was faithful. He passed!

But what if he failed the test? What if God was running this test like one of those automated tests that allow you to keep answering questions until you reach a certain threshold of wrong answers and then your test ends? I think that's what happens when you take the driver's test or some aptitude tests. What if, as Abraham pulled back the knife, God was like, "Hells bells, I've seen enough." I imagine all along God was wondering where the guy who argued with him about saving Sodom and Gomorrah went. I preached on that text a couple weeks ago. In that story, Abraham bargained with God, asking God if 30 people, or twenty, or ten, righteous people were found in Sodom, would God save it then? He had a lot to say to God that day, but Abraham didn't utter even a word in defense of his son. Not a word. God told him to sacrifice the fulfillment of God's promise to him and Abraham can only say, "I'm here for it."

At the beginning of this sermon, I said one of the questions often asked in relation to this story is, "What kind of father is willing to sacrifice his child?" What if the question for us is really, what kind of God asks a parent to sacrifice their child? I mean...just last week, we talked about a God who created day and night, land and

sea, fish and birds, animals and humans, from nothing and that same God declared all of it good. That God brings order to chaos, hope to despair, light to darkness. That is a God we can trust in all times and places.

How could Abraham think that kind of God is also the kind of God who would ask a parent to kill their child to prove their faithfulness? To me, that sounds more like a fraternity hazing than a relationship test between a loving, trustworthy God and God's beloved human being. Did Abraham know God at all? Is God in the habit of using the ones who are vulnerable, a child in this case, to make a point? And what about Sarah? She finally had what she had always wanted...a child.

I wonder how Sarah found out what happened. Did she ever see her son again? A few verses after our reading stops, the narrator says Abraham returned to the men at the bottom of the mountain. It doesn't say anything about Isaac returning with him. Can you blame him? I've talked before about midrash which are Jewish writings that fill in the gaps or answer questions of the Hebrew texts. One midrash written about Sarah's death which is reported in the chapter that follows this story, says that Satan, a mythical adversary, came to Sarah while Abraham and Isaac were away. He showed Sarah a vision of the two of them on the mountain at the very moment Abraham lifted the knife to Isaac. The midrash says the image of her husband killing their son killed her.

And then there's Isaac. We don't know exactly how old he was in the story. The text refers to him as a boy, but he carried the wood up the mountain, so he was not a toddler. He would have remembered this. Regardless of his age, he was the son of the man who was willing to kill him. I think somewhere along the line we've gotten a little twisted in our interpretation of this story. We've focused so much on Abraham's faithfulness that we've forgotten the son that was used that day.

Do we believe God desires a trail of broken relationships and trauma to prove our faithfulness? Can you understand why people would read this story, framed in terms of Abraham proving his faithfulness to God, and want nothing to do with that God?

Here's what I believe, sometimes the biblical writers tell us a story about someone getting it wrong. Sometimes we are supposed to learn from their mistakes and do better. You may be wondering how God responded to Abraham

following this event. Rev. Dr. Lisa Davison Hebrew Bible Professor at Phillips Theological Seminary, wrote a sermon about this text in which she said, "...God's reaction to Abraham's behavior is revealed in the fact that, in the rest of the biblical story, God never speaks to Abraham again. As one who had enjoyed intimate conversations with the divine, Abraham lives the rest of his life without hearing another word from God." "What are we to make of this response by God," Dr. Davison writes, "I believe that like us, God watched in disbelief as Abraham raised the knife over Isaac, ready to kill his son...What kind of a God do you think I am?"

The story of Abraham and Isaac asks us to consider what it means to be faithful in light of what we believe about the nature of God. It seems to me, that to be faithful to a God who loves everyone, seeks wholeness for everyone, and always, always, stands with the ones who are vulnerable, we are called to love everyone, seek wholeness for everyone, and always, always stands with the ones who are vulnerable. Abraham didn't do that in this story. I am going to give him an F. And I am also going to give thanks to a God who gives us all second chances, even when we get it very, very wrong.

Amen.