

The Test  
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor  
6/29/08

#### Genesis 22:1-14 (NRSV)

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. So 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." So 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 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"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

#### SACRIFICING OUR SONS

Some of you may have seen the latest political ad sponsored by the liberal group, Move On.Org. A young lady is holding a baby named Alex that she is supposedly introducing to presidential candidate, John McCain. Alex is a cute little fellow who loves to chase the dog and eat.

But, then the innocent commercial turns serious. Mom is worried by McCain's commitment to staying the course in Iraq. She can envision little Alex being drafted at some future time so she says with an air of defiance, "If you're counting on Alex, you can't have him."

It's a powerful commercial because many of us know those protective feelings that we have toward our children. There is much that we would sacrifice for our children, but what parent worth their salt would ever willingly allow their child to be sacrificed? People are rightly worried about foreign entanglements and the sacrifices those future generations might have to make. We don't want our children to be sacrificed.

The lady in the political ad has it right. War does indeed have a high cost.

And John McCain talks about the high cost of war in one of his own political commercials. His father and grandfather were officers during World War II. When his grandfather finally made it home after the war, he died the very next day.

Of course we all know the story of how McCain was a POW during the Vietnam War and refused his captors' offer to release him early because his father was a high ranking naval officer. What the commercial doesn't say is that two of McCain's own sons have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. McCain closes by saying that he would never needlessly go to war, but he also wants to keep this country that he loves safe.

Do we need to sacrifice our children in order to keep our country safe? This will undoubtedly be a heated debate in the coming campaign. But, this morning's Scripture lesson is about a sacrifice that is even more frightening.

### SACRIFICING THE SON OF PROMISE

God tests Abraham. God tells Abraham to take his only son Isaac, go to the land of Moriah, and sacrifice his beloved son on the mountain that God will show him.

Abraham was used to God's demanding call. Many years before this terrible test God used the same kind of distinctive language to tell old Abraham to pack up everything he had and leave the land of his ancestors. With that call Abraham was asked to sacrifice his past for the sake of God's call. Abraham was asked to leave everything that was familiar to him in order to follow the uncertain path of God.

Now, after years of struggle the promise of that first call had, at long last, been fulfilled. Sarah in her old age had conceived and bore him a son, Isaac. He is the miracle child that Abraham loves more than life itself. Isaac whose name means "he laughs" was the joy of their lives. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."

But, in today's lesson the laughter has come to an abrupt end. The laughing child who enjoys chasing the dog and making funny faces is to be sacrificed. God has already asked Abraham to sacrifice his past when asked him to sacrifice his home. Now God is asking Abraham to sacrifice his future by sacrificing his only son.

And what does Abraham do? Does he consult with Sarah? Does he argue and plead for God's mercy as he did for the ill-fated residents of Sodom and Gomorrah? Does he cry out in anger and fear, "You can't have my son?"

No, he just saddles up the donkey and sets out to do the unthinkable, sacrifice his own son.

If we weren't so familiar with this story we would probably find it very disturbing. What kind of God tests his servant in such a severe way? And what kind of father is willing to do such a thing?

## AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

As much as we would like to protect our little laughing baby boy or girl, most of us know that there will come a time when that is just not possible. We try our best to keep them safe when they are little, but when they grow up they will make their own choices.

And we will not have any control over the dangers that may come their way.

We cannot keep them safe. Life has no guarantees. We don't want to give them up, but we will have no choice. The young are our future, but they are an uncertain future.

What can we do? We do not have the power to protect the ones we love the most. We cannot keep our children or our country safe. All that we are and all that we have is fleeting. All that we have can be gone in a moment.

Oddly enough the only way to protect what we love the most is to sacrifice it to God.

We cannot hold on to the past or the future. There will always be experiences in life that will put us to the test. The specter of a sacrificial mountain in Moriah still looms for us all. It is only a matter of time before we too face senseless loss. And our faith will be tested. We will be tempted to use this occasion as a reason to turn away from God.

In our pain we may ask, "If God loves me, why has God asked me to sacrifice so much?"

Abraham was the first to receive the promises of God. God promised Abraham that he would make of him a great nation. God promised Abraham that through his offspring all the peoples of the world would be blessed.

But, this story teaches us that receiving the promises of God did not entail being protected from moments that seemed to call those promises into question.

Though Abraham was chosen by God for a special purpose, this did not mean his life was in any respect easy. In fact Abraham spent much of his life wandering in the wilderness no doubt wondering how in the world God was going to make good on his promises.

And now that God has called Abraham to sacrifice his only son, can the promises of God truly be fulfilled? It seems like an impossible test of faith. How can anyone be expected to sacrifice their only son?

## THE SACRIFICES WE ARE WILLING TO MAKE

And yet we often sacrifice the people we love every day for much less than the call of God. Pat Nixon once said, “I have sacrificed everything in my life that I consider precious in order to advance the political career of my husband.”

When I look at our current candidates for president I wonder what they may be sacrificing personally in order to attain that high office. Sometimes marriages fall apart and children are estranged from their parents because someone is supposedly sacrificing everything for the “good” of the family or some other higher cause.

Rabbi Norman Cohen wrote about our tendency to sacrifice everything for things that are not of ultimate value in his commentary on this passage. He wrote,

“We are all like Abraham; so involved in our outside world—our careers, interests or principles—that we do not or cannot see that it is our child, or spouse or parent that is bound on the altar. We are so adept at sacrificing that which is truly important to us on the altars we have erected that we may ask whether we are capable of hearing the cry of the angel before it is too late.”

I think the Rabbi has a point. Is it really God who calls us to sacrifice the ones we love? Or could it be that the voice we hear is not the voice of God but the sound of our own ambition.

One advantage of sacrificing everything, even the one we love most to God is that we do not end up sacrificing them to some lesser god. Lesser gods are never satisfied with the sacrifices we make. The god of economic prosperity always desires just a little bit more. The god of war always desires just one more battle to make the world safe. The god of desire requires just one more expression of love.

These gods are never satisfied no matter how much we give. These gods have an insatiable desire to take over our lives. These gods require sacrifices that cost too much. These gods make promises that are never fulfilled.

But, the one true God can be trusted to give us what we need when we need it. If in humility we turn our lives over to him, if we lay all that is precious to us on the altar of sacrifice, we can learn in a personal way that the promises of God are true.

## GOD WILL PROVIDE

In our lesson for today Isaac seems to get the idea that there is something is “fishy” about this trip to the mountains of Moriah. He says, “Um father, I notice we have wood and the means to make fire for the offering, but we have no sacrificial lamb. Shouldn’t we have a sacrificial lamb?”

And Abraham answers, “God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.”

This is the faith that allows Abraham to sacrifice even his own son. He believed that God would provide what he needed when he needed it.

After a lifetime of struggle Abraham was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to his God. He trusted in God to make a way where there seems to be no way. He trusted in the promises and goodness of God even in the most difficult of circumstances.

This was Abraham's test of faith; this is our test as well. Do we believe in the promise of God even when all that we love is being sacrificed in a way that makes no sense? Do we believe that the Providential care of God trumps every triumph and disaster?

### WHO PROVIDES THE SACRIFICE?

We say that human sacrifice is repulsive and primitive. And it is.

If you allow yourself to think what it would be like to bind your only son and raise the knife determined to go through with the sacrifice ... it is beyond our comprehension. If someone were to do something like this today, that person would be on the six o'clock news being led away in handcuffs.

There are some who say that the sacrificial emphasis in the Bible has led some to justify abuse in various forms. For example, one feminist theologian wrote, "The ideal of the helpless divine victim serves only to strengthen ... the potential for victimization and to subvert initiatives for freedom ..."

In other words Christianity has been used to keep women down. If the best person who lived gave his life for others, then to be of value women should likewise sacrifice themselves. If this seems far fetched to you let me assure you that as a pastor I have seen many males use a certain brand of Christianity as a means of keeping women "in their place." The same technique was used during the time of the civil war to justify slavery.

In the same way the concept of sacrifice has been used to repress and abuse children and generally spread feelings of guilt and misunderstanding about the faith. The stories of sacrifice in the Bible are definitely stories with a double-edged blade.

We have to be very careful in our interpretation lest we send the wrong message. We can make the Bible say that someone must be sacrificed for our own good. We can use the Bible to further our own goals.

In order to get the right message we have to ask the right question. And the question is this: Who provides the sacrifice in this story?

In the end the sacrifice is provided by God. In the end the test is not Abraham's test but God's test. Through this terrible ordeal Abraham learns once again that God can be trusted to provide.

God speaks to Abraham and tells him not to harm his child. A ram caught in the thicket is provided by God as an acceptable sacrifice. And in true biblical fashion that place on the

mountaintop is renamed “Jehovah Jireh” or “The Lord will provide.” And the people had a saying that came from this story, “On the mountain the Lord will provide.”

## A LIFETIME OF TESTING

In today’s lesson Abraham passed the test. He was willing to sacrifice his beloved son to God.

But, as one commentator pointed out don’t think that Abraham always passed the test that God gave him. Sometimes he failed miserably.

In times of danger Abraham tried to protect his own life by claiming that Sarah was his sister. In his despair over Sarah’s barrenness and his advancing age, Abraham decided to help the promise of God along by conceiving a son, Ishmael with the maid Hagar.

But, after a lifetime of struggling, old Abraham manages to pass the final exam. He trusts God and his promises enough to even sacrifice his own son on the altar of faith. And on that altar he learns the lesson again. On the mountain the Lord will provide. The sacrifice has already been made for us.

For us, like Abraham the road to faith is a long and rocky way. Sometimes there are steep tests of faith. And sometimes out of fear we fail miserably. We let someone else sacrifice to protect us. We try to “help” God by substituting our own desires for God’s will.

But, when we finally summon the courage to climb the high mountain that God shows us and let go of all that is dear to us we learn the truth. Jesus put it this way, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.” Luke 17:33 (NRSV)

The final test, the final exam comes at the end of life. When we climb that lonely mountain and finally release the one we love the most, it is the supreme test of faith. What do we really believe about God?

The story of sacrifice never ends. Each step we take in life brings us closer to the ultimate test. But, the God who has created everything can be trusted to provide what we need. We need not fear the journey.

We need not fear death. We need not fear losing the one most precious to us. On the mountain God will provide.

Fredrick Buechner wrote that “faith is better understood as a verb than a noun, as a process than a possession. It is on again off again rather than once and for all. Faith is not being sure where you’re going but going anyway, a journey without maps.”

For Abraham faith was never a noun. Faith required risking everything. And through faith everything was gained.

## ANOTHER SACRIFICE

Those of us who are Christians can't help but think about another story of sacrifice on another mount called Calvary. On that hill just outside of town near the local landfill, the Romans practiced human sacrifice all the time.

What was it a Communist leader once said? If you're going to make an omelet you have to crack some eggs. In order to establish a communist government those who objected would need to be dealt with harshly. Thousands of human sacrifices were made to establish that "utopian" state.

It wasn't any different in Jesus' day. The Romans were quite happy to crack some eggs and some heads. In order to maintain their far flung government ... their Pax Romana ... they knew there would be costs. And they were willing to let the residents of their conquered territories pay the price.

In fact in one day alone they made over 2,000 human sacrifices to that god of peace. They called these sacrifices crucifixions. Some of the people they murdered were willing to die for their country. If they had bombs in those days surely many of these zealots would have gladly sacrificed themselves for the "good" of their country.

But, there was one who was sacrificed who didn't deserve it. He didn't pose a threat to the Romans or the Jews. He had come to bring his heavenly Father's message, a message of love and salvation.

But, the message sounded strange and dangerous to the powers that be. The crowds were getting too big, and there was talk of making him king. So, they decided that it would be better to sacrifice this strange prophet rather than risk a greater uprising.

And so they killed the son of God. They sacrificed him on Calvary's mount. In this case the Father being tested was God himself. How would God respond to this sacrifice? Would he prevent it from happening? Would he destroy those responsible?

On the cross of Calvary the Son cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The sacrifice was made. He died on that cross. It seemed like one more senseless death in a world of senseless deaths.

Once again God provided on the mountain. He provided a Savior who took the sins of the world upon himself. On the cross God stretched out his arms and said I love you this much. I am even willing to die for you.

Calvary was a test for humanity, and we failed. God sent us his Son, and we killed him. Don't think that it would be any different today. Around the world human sacrifices are being made every day so that dictators can stay in power and nations can project their own interests. We would fail the test today just as surely as they failed it long ago.

But, God passed the test. Though we are faithless, God is faithful. Through we sacrifice everything for our own selfish desires; God sacrificed his Son for the salvation of the world. One of the first verses we ever memorized tells us that truth, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." (John 3:16)

## THE HOPE OF LIFE ETERNAL

In the New Testament book of Hebrews we read an interesting interpretation of Abraham's faith.

*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, [18] of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." [19] He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead--and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. Hebrews 11:17-19 (NRSV)*

In other words, Abraham believed that the God who made heaven and earth could remake his son. The God who miraculously provided a son in his old age could provide a way of salvation on the mountain of sacrifice.

The salvation that Abraham received in a figurative sense became a reality in Jesus. The God who is able to bring life out of death shows us that even the worst that human beings can do is not enough to defeat His promise. The Son who is sacrificed on a cross is resurrected on the third day (cf. Genesis 22:4), and the world is given hope forever.

Maxie Dunnam, a Methodist minister told of his brother in law's struggle with cancer. Before his death 43 year old Randy Morris wrote Maxie a letter. Randy said that he prepared for prayer by using a visualization technique. He traveled in his mind to a beloved place in the north Georgia mountains. There was a gazebo in that place, and that is where he went in his mind in order to talk with Jesus.

He said that normally he would go in and call for Jesus and he would come. Randy would go through his usual list of prayers and thanksgivings.

But, when Randy got word that his cancer was back he was an "emotional wreck."

Randy prayed. Once again in his mind he was in the mountains waiting for Jesus to come to the door of the gazebo. And then something totally unexpected happened that brought a flood of tears.

Randy saw himself as a five year old boy. He became like a "camera recording the event." In the person of this boy he ran up to Jesus and hugged him. He pictured Jesus picking him up and carrying him to a seat and holding him in his arms.

Randy wrote,

“I didn’t say anything. He knew I was frightened. There were no answers, and the future seemed so dim. But, as he hugged me he said, ‘Trust me. Trust me.’ Jesus held me for a long time that night until I understood what he meant. We must trust Jesus as a child trusts ... totally.”

Randy concluded his letter with these words,

“Because of this experience, whatever turns out to be the ultimate result of this disease, it’s not the burden it was before. Jesus made no promise, nor did he reveal the future, but he had provided the format for living out the rest of my life with just two words ... Trust me.”

What mountain is God asking you to climb? What sacrifice is God asking you to make? The time of testing can help our faith grow. During the time of trial we realize that we cannot provide for ourselves.

But, God can and does provide the sacrifice that we need the most. Those two words provide the format for the rest of our life as well. Jesus tells us in our time of need, “Trust me.”

Won’t you climb the mountain with Jesus today?

We don’t know how. We don’t know when. But, one thing we do know. On the mountain God will provide.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)