



June 23, 2019

Sermon Series: Mountaintop Experiences

Mount Moriah: A Place Where Faith is Put to the Test

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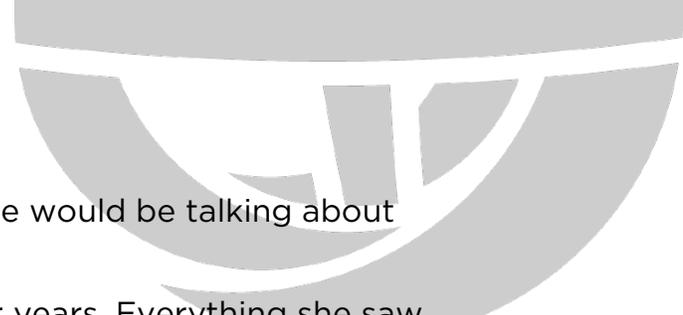
Genesis 22:1-14 NRSV

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ²He 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." ³So 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. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then 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." ⁶Abraham 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. ⁷Isaac 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?" ⁸Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

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

How do you create faith?

Zumbro member Sue Reed has an idea - though you might not like it. She didn't either, for a long time.



Sue emailed me this week when she saw that we would be talking about Genesis 22 this morning.

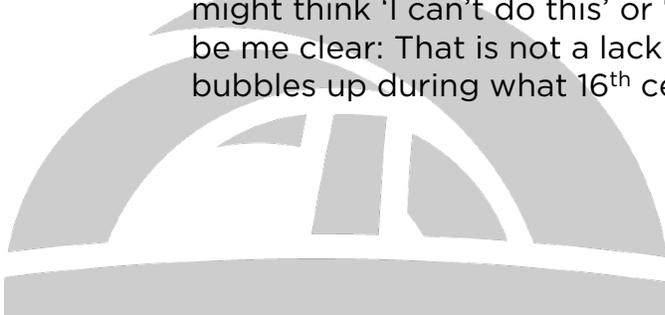
You see, Sue wrote that she hated this story for years. Everything she saw in it was appalling: God's instruction to Abraham to slaughter his son Isaac; Abraham's blind acquiescence; the complete lack of moral and ethical character shown by both of them. But most of all, Sue rebelled against the idea that God would somehow test people, as a way to see how far they would go to obey him.

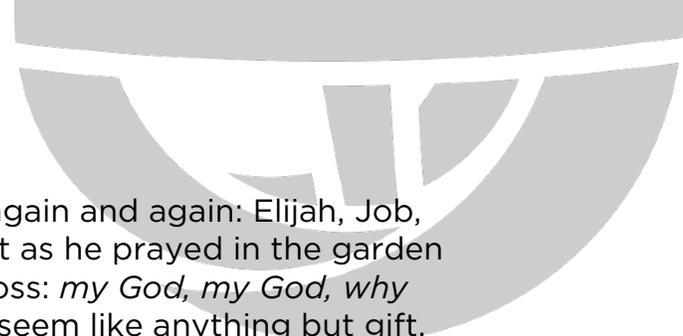
Then, she wrote, her son started suffering from a prolonged illness. It was heartbreaking and challenging. There was nothing she could do to help him. Eventually, she came to the realization that she had to completely turn her son's future over to God. And that terrified her. Because Sue was so sure that if her son died, it would mean that God hadn't come through. It felt like a test: Would she have enough faith to be ok with whatever happened to her boy?

For some reason, as Sue was struggling to make sense of her son's illness and her own next steps, she kept coming back to this passage of scripture. She spent over a year studying it, digging deep into the questions the text raised in her. And she began to realize that just as Abraham was tested, she was being tested as well. But somehow that test led her not to turn away from her faith, but to lean in closer. She found comfort in thoughts like, "If I were Abraham and was climbing up that mountain, I might remember all those other times God told me to do something, and it worked out." And, "Even if Abraham said no, God was still going to love him." And, "If my son doesn't survive that just means that he is now with God." Finally, Sue came to a place of peace with this story: Now, she no longer thinks of it as a test, but as a gift. How do you create faith? Sue Reed discovered one way is by being put to the test. Because what is faith if not a great gift from God - a gift that gives us the will and strength to keep climbing.

Friends, the mountaintop experience we're exploring today is one no one wants - but at some point in time, most of us have. Time and again our faith is put to the test. It is tested when we experience failure. It is tested when we are betrayed by someone we trust. It is tested when tragedy strikes. It is tested when we see injustice, and it is tested when we are plunged into deep grief.

In those moments we are bent and sometimes broken, we are confused and conflicted. God can seem absent at best and capricious at worst. Our prayers might be 'where are you, God?' or 'why is this happening?' We might think 'I can't do this' or 'I don't understand' or 'just make it stop.' Let me be clear: That is not a lack of faith. That's the kind of raw honesty that bubbles up during what 16th century mystic St. John of the Cross called the





dark night of the soul. It shows up in scripture again and again: Elijah, Job, the Psalms. Even Jesus' faith was put to the test as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane and as he cried out from the cross: *my God, my God, why have you forsaken me*. Now, that moment may seem like anything but gift. But anytime we reach out to God is an act of faith. It's one more step up the mountain.

So where do you start when your faith is put to the test? For most of us, it's with *why*?

And that's a big stumbling block with this story from Genesis. Because Abraham doesn't seem to ask that question. We know it's a test right from the beginning - it says so in v. 1. But Abraham doesn't. And he appears to go right along with God's command without hesitation. Didn't he wonder what God was asking of him: To sacrifice his own son, the boy he and Sarah had prayed for and agonized over ... why? Why would God ask that? We don't know. We don't know why God would ask for Isaac's sacrifice at the beginning of this story. We don't know why God spares him at the end.

Volumes have been written parsing this out. But I'm not sure it matters. That's one of the keys of faith, isn't it? It is something we cannot see, it eludes concrete verifiable logic, we do not get to fit it into our neat rational boxes. But while we do not know the *why*, we do know the *what*: faith is, at its core, about relationship. We cannot have faith in someone we do not know. If we are to put our confidence, our heart, our future, in the hands of another, we had better discern who they are and what they stand for.

Perhaps it helps to recognize that it's not just Abraham's faith that is being put to the test here. Yes, he has to dig deep as he leans into God's provenance. Abraham has to be assured that God knows what God is doing; that God can be trusted; that God will provide. But God is also experiencing a time of testing. Is the faith he has placed in Abraham going to bear fruit? Will Abraham really be as loyal and steadfast as God hopes? Surprised by that? The text is clear: we may talk about God's omniscience - but at the beginning, he does not know if Abraham will listen and obey; by the end of the story, God says, *now I know*.

And let's not forget that this story is a test of our own faith as readers. Can we continue to walk with this story - not accept it, not explain it, not understand it. Just listen to it. Wrestle and ask and wait to see what it does in us.

Now maybe you can't get past the depravity of God's request. That's ok.

Maybe you haven't yet felt the peace Sue Reed found in the midst of her searching. That's ok.





Maybe you don't know based on your own struggles and experiences if God can fully be trusted. That's ok.

Maybe you see way too many things in the world or in your own life that make you wonder if God is even paying attention. That's ok.

If we can learn anything from this difficult story, it is this: Just keep walking up that mountain. Don't give up hope. Because God will provide. Whatever it is that you need to pass life's tests - more strength, more courage, more gentleness, more acceptance, more forgiveness, more trust, more faith, more unconditional love - whatever it is, in time, God will provide it. And that is, indeed a most gracious gift. Amen.

