

Pentecost VII

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13

God tested Abraham. But Abraham didn't know it was a test. He thought God's command was for real. So when God called out, "Abraham!", Abraham said, "Here I am!"

Isaac called on Abraham a little while later - "Father!" he said. Abraham again answered, "Here I am." But this time, he was the parent in the relationship. Isaac was under his care. Even knowing that God had told him to kill Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham's faith was such that he still answered his son with, "God will provide." God will provide what? Abraham trusted God enough to be able to say "God will provide," and to continue walking toward what God had commanded. We don't know what Abraham was thinking as he walked up the mountain with his son. As a parent, he probably had a very high level of anxiety. Would God really expect him to kill his only son?

Remember that in the previous chapter of Genesis, Isaac had to banish his slave Hagar and their son Ishmael into the desert. Ishmael's existence threatened Isaac's birthright and Sarah wanted Ishmael gone and out of the picture. But God told Abraham he would provide for Ishmael and God did indeed do that. Hagar didn't know everything would be okay until she was at her wits' end on the journey into the desert. She thought she would be watching her son die from thirst. But God intervened and provided. Ishmael grew to be a fine young man with a nation of descendants.

We don't know if Abraham remembered that God took care of Ishmael - that God provided. Now the situation was about Isaac, the son of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. Abraham was being asked to give up a second son. Abraham didn't know he was being tested, but he trusted in God and he obeyed.

It's not like God asked Abraham to do something God would do. God sacrificed Jesus. Jesus was tested; his followers were tested; his mother was tested. But God provided and Jesus conquered death three days later.

God tested; God provided.

Does God test us? Do we mean it when we say, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle"? How do we know that our challenges are God testing us rather than merely challenges in our lives? Do we believe that God causes babies to die with holes in their hearts or that God causes fatal traffic accidents or that God sends tornados and hurricanes and floods that kill thousands of people because God wants to test how strong our faith is?

Let's bring that question down to an even mundane level. Did God cause the Los Angeles Lakers to lose so the Boston Celtics could finally win another championship? Some might have said that happened because God is Irish Catholic. Does God listen to the prayers of sports teams who are looking for victory? Does God cause planes to fall from the sky and go out of business? Is God behind the killing of over 4000 American troops and hundreds of thousands of civilians in Iraq? In fact, who is God supporting in the conflicts among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. They're all Abraham's descendants, after all.

Are these situations all reflective of God continuing to test humanity? What kind of god would serve all of this tragedy on the people created by and in the image of that same god?

God tested Abraham. The relationship between God and humanity was still developing and God had chosen Abraham to be the point person in this divine-human covenant of God caring for a people through a righteous relationship. To what extent would Abraham trust that God would provide? Could God count on Abraham's faith during his darkest and most difficult times? Abraham's trust in God was primary in the relationship between humanity and the divine.

God tested Abraham and God provided. Abraham's faith brought him to the ultimate test and God was there to intervene as Abraham obeyed God to the supposed end. God was there through one of the angel messengers to stop Abraham from carrying through on God's command. God provided what Abraham needed.

A god of love does not test us by sending tragedy and death and dysfunctional families and even lost sports competitions. But a god of love does help us and carry us and walk with us as we move through those crises in life. God always provides. So many times we don't realize that God is waiting with the word or the strength or the confidence that we need. So many times we feel so deep in the pit of despair that we can neither hear nor see God right next to us, walking that journey with us. So many times we ignore God when we think we have to tough something out - we think that we just need to be stronger.

But God walks with us just as God walked up that mountain with Abraham and Isaac. Remember the familiar verse from the 23rd psalm - "... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil for you are with me. Your rod and your staff comfort me." Look at Psalm 13 again. Initially a song of despair that becomes a song of steadfast faith and thanksgiving ... "I trusted in your steadfast love ... and you have dealt bountifully with me." This doesn't mean that the psalmist had no doubts - look at the language again - "How long, God? How long? ; How long will you abandon me and hide from me?" But once the psalmist opens her eyes and ears and is able to feel God's closeness and support, then the load of despair is lightened and the psalmist no longer faces her difficulties are alone.

We don't need to spend a lot of time trying to figure out if God actually causes tragedy to happen. There are lots of reasons that bad things happen and those reasons are usually based in human behavior or natural upheavals rather than a loving God. Abraham didn't know what God was up to with his command to sacrifice Isaac; Isaac didn't know what was going on when he realized his father didn't have a fatted calf to sacrifice. But Abraham trusted that God would provide; Isaac trusted that his father would provide. Regardless of what we're facing, we need to focus on God's presence with us in the midst of difficulties. Like the lost lamb who returns in the loving arms of the shepherd, we too can be held up in those arms as we walk through our own tests. We don't have to be stoic and self-controlled; we can lean on our loving God. Just as Abraham and Isaac returned from the mountain, God will walk with us through whatever difficulty there is and bring us to a place of love and that peace that passes all understanding. God does provide.

Amen.

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