

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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Genesis 22:1-18

What Purpose Could Recounting the Test of Abraham Possibly Serve for Us?

1. It serves as an example of
2. It serves as a foreshadowing

Hymns: 98 – *The Lamb* – 121

Closing: 111

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Genesis 22:1-18 –

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac

and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

Some Bible stories are quaint and enjoyable to teach:

- Jesus and the Little Children – How wonderful it is to recount the story of how Jesus had time to bless the little children whose parents brought them to him. He corrected his disciples and then took the children on his lap and blessed them.
- The Christmas story – How this story fills us with awe as we see how God guided history and circumstances to bring about the birth of the Son of God at the right time. How heartwarming it is to see how God provided for Mary and Joseph's needs during that difficult time.
- The glory of Pentecost Day
- The story of how God provided for Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth.

And then there are other stories, which are the exact opposite of a “teacher’s dream”:

- Cain and Abel – A brother murders a brother
- The Flood – The fate of all those people of the world
- David and Bathsheba
- But one of the most difficult stories to use in teaching is the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham. In fact, this story has undergone more criticism in its stark, shocking details than perhaps any other story in Scripture. Even with art for children’s books, a teacher must use discernment!

On this first Sunday of Lent, as we use this for our sermon text, let’s ask, **“What Purpose Could Recounting Isaac’s Sacrifice Possibly Serve for Us?”** We will learn two lessons for our faith and our Lenten walk today.

1. It serves as an example of faith and obedience

Let’s remind ourselves of what had happened in Abraham’s life up to this point. It had certainly had its highlights of a strong faith in God’s promises:

- Abraham had followed God’s call when the Lord told him to get away from his idolatrous family. He had taken his possessions and family and had gone to a land he had not even seen yet, because the Lord had commanded him to do so.
- After God revealed that he would give his descendants the land of Canaan, Abraham built and altar to the Lord and worshiped him.
- Abraham had given his nephew Lot the better choice of land for his herds and flocks.

- Abraham had rescued Lot and the cities’ citizens when they were attacked by four invading kings.
- When God told him that the son he had promised to Abraham in his old age would be a biological son and not his head servant Eliezar, Abraham had believed the Lord.
- When the three visitors came in Genesis 18 (the Lord and two angels) and revealed that the son would be there by that time next year, Abraham believed, even though his wife Sarah laughed.

Abraham had his bumps in the road along the way, but he stands as an example of faith and trust in God’s promises!

At the time of our text, Isaac had been born and was entering the prime of life. Now there could be a period of great happiness for aging Abraham. He was experiencing the joys of fatherhood and witnessing the development of his eagerly cherished son into the strength of manhood.

Then God came calling. We read, *“God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.’”* The dramatic emphasis in word order cannot be missed in the original language. The word order goes: “Take – indeed (emphasis) – your son – your only – whom you love – Isaac...” God could have stopped with just “your son,” but emphatically reminded Abraham who this individual was – His beloved, only son!

What must have been going through Abraham’s mind at that time? He had waited 25 years for this son. Two conflicts undoubtedly raged in his mind. First, the love of a father for his own son. (And what would he tell his mother?) Secondly, the promise that God had made that this son was the son of a promise. This son Isaac was the blessed

son who would be in the line of God's promise of a Savior. Why would God command this?

We know now. In hindsight, God lets us in on the reason for his command. Later in the chapter the Lord says, "*Do not lay a hand on the boy... Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.*" This was a test. It was not a whim of a God who delights in human sacrifice, for we have plenty of Scriptural references that condemn that practice in the OT. It was not a God who changes his mind and his plan at the drop of a hat. It was a God who was testing his child's faith and obedience. After all, there is a difference between saying "Lord, I love you" and showing it. This test was for Abraham's benefit, to realize that his full allegiance was owed to God.

The nature of a test is not pleasant at the time. How many of you really looked forward to test day at school? And this test that God applied to Abraham was most difficult.

What was the result? Abraham passed the test. He passed it in an amazing display of obedience. We hear that the next morning he got up to leave on the trip that God had commanded him to make. We don't even hear of any questions or complaints that Abraham raised:

- "Lord, this is murder – I won't do it!"
- "Lord, take anything else, but not my son."
- "Lord, you cannot grieve my wife in this way."

Instead, he rose to make the 50-mile trip to the region where God commanded him to go. The Lord had also allowed for plenty of time on that 3-day trip for Abraham to think about his assignment and to question whether he would follow through with it.

We see expressions of faith on the journey. Abraham said to his servants that they should stop at a certain point and says, "We will be coming back to you." When his son Isaac asked the question that must have cut him to the core – "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice, father?" – he responds honestly, "God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son."

How could Abraham have had such faith and obedience to the Lord? Scripture gives us another insight. In Hebrews 11 in the NT, Abraham is mentioned in the "Hall of Faith" and it says: "*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'* Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." That is what Abraham thought, and with complete, implicit trust he followed the Lord's command to him.

The Lord is not a God who delights in such a sacrifice, and so he stops Abraham from following through with the act and here responds with blessings and promises:

- He provides a ram for the sacrifice in another dramatic Hebrew sentence in this text.
- He then says, "*I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*" More dramatic Hebrew: "Surely I will bless to bless

you... I will increase to increase your descendants."

This is our first purpose in recounting this difficult story today. Abraham serves as an example of faith and obedience for us.

We have not been commanded by God to carry out the same command that he gave Abraham long ago, yet the concept of complete faith and obedience is still ours to keep. What lessons this Bible story teaches us about the First Commandment: "**You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.**"

"Yes," you say, "God has my complete trust and obedience (and I'm glad he hasn't commanded me to carry out such a sacrifice)!" I'm glad he hasn't commanded the same specific sacrifice for you also, but what about our complete allegiance, trust, and obedience? The obvious application here is that we are not to love anyone or anything more than God himself. How might we not pass the test today?

What about a son or daughter? Jesus reiterated in Matthew 10, "*Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*" This may seem like a concept that a Christian parent would undoubtedly obey, but can a parent look at their child through rose-colored glasses and forget about the difference between right and wrong?

What about when a test comes for real, when their adult children aren't going to church anymore? Is this something an aging parent will address directly and clearly? Or is there a temptation to remain quiet about it?

What about when a child who is supposed to be grown up decides to live in a sinful lifestyle, moving in with their girlfriend? Would you express your clear disapproval and condemn their action? Or would you try to "keep the peace" to the detriment of sending a message? We certainly could have a

discussion today about keeping doors of communication open and at what time tough love should kick in. But I fear that many parents cannot bring themselves to side with the Lord on the side of right and say what must be said to their erring child.

How about one other area of application? A most difficult area for people to sacrifice in faith and trust to God is the area of money. Could you put this on the altar of obedience when God commands it? How are you at directly giving your money and offerings to the Lord here at your church?

- Is it difficult for you to write that check out each month or week, whatever your system is?
- Do you struggle to give the Lord your first-fruits and your best? Do you insult him with leftovers in your budget?
- Are you not generous with your offerings because you're having too much fun spending money on your wants?
- Do you not offer him a tithe as OT believers did, because you either don't trust that he'll provide enough for your personal needs or because you just don't want to?

Suddenly we find ourselves in sensitive areas, don't we? But this is what happens in the area of the First Commandment. Put your finger on the right sore spot, and the pain becomes obvious. And these are the tests that that Lord continues to give his people as he gives and takes from our lives for our good.

May we learn a lesson about faith and obedience from this story today as we see the father of believers pass the test God gave him.

2. It serves as a foreshadowing of Lent

We can't quite stop there today. One other lesson awaits in this difficult account from Scripture. This lesson is necessary for us because in much of what we have seen up to this point, we see our failure. We have not lived up to the obedience God requires or the example of the father of believers, Abraham. Therefore, we rejoice in the second purpose of this story today, which is taught to us on this first Sunday of Lent.

As we gather at the beginning of Lent, a mountain lies in the distance. It is also a mountain of sacrifice. We do not see two figures – Abraham and Isaac – ascending this mountain, but rather one figure. It is the figure of one who is foreshadowed in this reading today, the one through whom all nations on earth would be blessed. It is Christ. This Lent we see him ascend the mount for our sake.

Many similarities exist between the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, even though Isaac is never specifically called a “type” of Christ:

- Both accounts involve a father's willing sacrifice
- Both accounts involve an only son, one who was intensely loved by the father
- Both involve an innocent victim
- Both involve a willing victim, ones who carried the wood for their own sacrifice. Isaiah 53 says, “*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.*”

- Both involve faith in the son rising from the dead. In Abraham's mind this was as good as done in Isaac's case. In Christ's case, this was actually done as he would not stay dead in the tomb, but would rise victoriously.

There is one major difference between the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Christ. No substitution would be made for the Son, in Christ's case. No animal would be produced. For your sake and for your sin, the price of his costly life needed to be paid to assure you of your forgiveness and your salvation. And by the willing sacrifice that Christ the Son of God made, our sins have been forgiven. 1 Peter 2 tells us, “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*”

The mountain Abraham named was, “The LORD will provide.” We can rightly name Calvary, “The LORD has provided,” as we see the salvation Christ won us.

These are the lessons from a “difficult” story from Scripture. I know many Sunday school teachers have probably wrestled with how to present this material to their children. **Today, we see two vital purposes for us in this story:**

1. **It serves as an example of faith and obedience**
2. **It serves as a lesson in what Lent is about**

May God comfort us today in the salvation he has provided for us. And may we follow in complete faith and obedience! Amen.