

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."

The Smithsonian is pretty excited about its new exhibit. Did you hear about it? They're showing off a Jefferson Bible. What's a Jefferson Bible? It's a Bible of Jefferson's own creation. The article says, "(He) constructed his book by cutting excerpts... of the Gospels of the New Testament." And not surprisingly, Jefferson is praised for his Bible mutilation. The Jefferson Bible is praised as "something fresh," "ambitious," and, "genius." The reality is something much more mundane. It's a product of Jefferson's unbelief. Thomas cut out everything he couldn't understand or observe in nature. He cut out of the Gospels every single miracle. He did that

because of a fundamental assumption about God. He didn't believe that God is interested in us. He didn't believe that God wants to interact with us. Thomas thought that God put together the world, set into place certain natural mechanisms and then stepped back to let the world run on its own. We call this system of belief deism.

Deism still hangs around in Christian churches. It's not here as a system of beliefs that we hold to. It's something more subtle and, therefore, arguably more dangerous. It is something called practical deism. Practical deism happens in people's hearts when people don't think that God is interested in their lives. It's more than that – it's when people don't think that God cares to intervene in their life, change it, empower it, and be there in it on a day-to-day basis.

There's an arc to every person's life and what you believe about it either makes you a practical deist or a Christian. The difference is this: Do you believe that the arc of your life is something that God has invested in to bring you closer to Jesus – that the arc of your life (every part of it) is a God wrought thing? Or do you believe on some level that God has shown some ambivalence by standing back and allowing something truly faith harming to happen to you? What do you believe about the arc of your life? The answer to those questions makes you either a Christian or a practical deist. Today God wants to make us all Christians in regard to those questions. He's going to do it by the power of his message in Genesis 22. Today God wants to show us that Jesus personally shows up in your life.

Now right away you're asking me, "Pastor, how you are going to show me Jesus' personal involvement in a story from early in the Old Testament? Jesus wasn't even born yet." Well, thanks for asking. You're right and you're wrong when you think that. Jesus wasn't begotten yet as a human, but he was certainly begotten. We say in the Nicene Creed that Jesus was "eternally begotten from the Father." Another church father said, "There was never a time when Jesus was not." Try to get your brain around that one. Jesus has always been around. There never was a time when he wasn't around. Jesus is eternal.

And here's another cool thought about Jesus: Jesus didn't spend eternity twiddling his thumbs. He was personally involved everywhere in everything. This story of Abraham's almost sacrifice of Isaac is a prime example. Fast forward to the part in the story where Abraham is about to bring the blade plunging down to gut his son and suddenly we're told, "**But the angel of the LORD called out to him... Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.**" (v. 11-12) There's a lot to talk about in this verse. For now I just want to show you Jesus. Notice the words, "Now I know you fear God, because you have not withheld from *me* your son, your only son." Do you see what the angel of the Lord is saying? He is saying that Abraham who was about to sacrifice Isaac to God didn't withhold him from *me*. The angel of the Lord is saying that he is the God to whom Abraham is sacrificing.

So which person of the Trinity is this angel of the Lord? Before we say anything else, let's remember what the word angel means. Angel means messenger. It means herald. So which person of the Trinity brings God's message to people? Who in the New Testament embodies God's message to people? That's Jesus. People have a big word for Jesus in the Old Testament. They call him the preincarnate Christ. That's an important sounding way of saying, "This is Jesus before he put on a body." So here's the point. Jesus shows up all over history as a personally involved God. In the Old Testament, he's called the angel of the Lord. In the New Testament, he shows up in human form as Jesus. God's point is clear. Wherever we're at in human history, Jesus is there personally involved in it.

We've seen so far that Jesus is involved, but we haven't yet seen *how* Jesus is personally involved. That's the part of Jesus' involvement that we want to see as we move more deeply into this story.

God shows us how he involves himself in Christian lives at the outset of the chapter. **"Some time later God tested Abraham." (v. 1)** The key word in the sentence is test. The concept of testing is important to how we view God and how we view his involvement with us. So what do we mean when we say that God is testing someone?

First, let's talk about what testing doesn't mean. Testing doesn't mean that God needs to find us out. I've heard people talk about testing like that before. People say, "God is really testing me right now. He wants to see if I'll pass the test." But that view of testing doesn't square with God's omniscience. What do I mean by that? God is omniscient. He knows everything. He doesn't need to find anything out about anything let alone us. He knows everything all already. Plus, if God is a God that wants our trust (and he is!), why would he want us to envision him as a reckless gambler with our spiritual lives. Like he sits in heaven, rolls the dice, crosses his fingers, and thinks to himself, "Bet myself that Bourman down there will make it through this trial. Let's see if I'm right." God doesn't test people so he can find out the spiritual stuff they're made of. He's not a gambler. He's a father. Father's test their children to grow them.

Let's watch this play out with Abraham. Before I point out some significant features about the story, we need to go back to another point in Abram's life. Back in Genesis 15, God came to Abram in a vision saying, "Abram, I am your shield. Your very great reward." And Abram takes the moment to dump on God. "What can you give me? I don't have a son." At the center of his being, at the bottom of his heart, Abram wanted a son. And then God gave him one. His name was Isaac. Now you tell me. What was the spiritual danger here for Abraham? The spiritual danger was love of Isaac replacing love of God. God needed to grow his child, Abraham, out of that risk. That's our danger and our sin too. Women and their kids, men and their careers, misers and their money are all illustrations of spiritual liabilities that we carry around inside us. God is not willing to risk a spiritual coup de tat of whatever our personal Isaac is. He needs to grow us.

So what does God do about it? He goes straight at the spiritual liability within Abraham. Make no mistake about it. This was painful. "Take your son, your only son, the one you love and slaughter him for me." Do you hear what God is saying? He is saying, "Take that which threatens love for me. Take that which wants to engineer a spiritual coup de tat inside you and slaughter it." God commanded that and then he made Abraham squirm. That's why he made him take a trip. For three days, Abraham had to spiritually wrestle, agonize, and hurt over this coming sacrifice of his son. Along the way, God made it even tougher. Isaac asked, "Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Can you imagine the inner turmoil that Abraham experienced over that question? What a dagger that must have been for him! Then they finally arrive and God lets him arrange the wood, bind up his son, and grab the knife. Can you imagine the anguish? What in the world is God doing?

This past Monday we had a parenting seminar at Trinity. It was honestly fascinating. One of the many great points the presenter made was this: "Change your thinking when it comes to mistakes. Get pumped when your kid makes a mistake because right now they're affordable." Here's what I took away from that: if kids get put in the pressure cooker when it's affordable (that is, before they become an adult), then they will have learned important lessons by the time mistakes become unaffordable and people really get hurt. He gave a great example of this. He bought his kid a toy helicopter that flew and he let one of his sons fly it recklessly. Why? Because his son needed to feel the pressure cooker of crashing the helicopter now so he wouldn't crash a car later in life. God put Abraham into the pressure cooker of experience here. It was an aspect of God's parenting. Why? So that Abraham wouldn't make the one eternally unaffordable mistake of loving Isaac more than God.

And that's the overall point here. Testing from God – whatever kind of trial you are experiencing – doesn't show a lack of involvement, care, or concern from God. Just the opposite. It shows involvement. It shows concern. It shows care. It shows your Father is parenting you. It shows that your Father is trying to stop you from making eternally unaffordable mistakes. You may not like it at the time. Abraham certainly didn't. But watch where God took Abraham in this whole parenting experience, **"Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son." (v. 10)** Abraham was really going to do it. He was actually going to kill the son that he loved. Now think about something for a second with me. What got killed? What ended up getting sacrificed on that dramatic day? I'll give you a hint. It wasn't Isaac. Improper love of Isaac is what was sacrificed. That's what God was after. That's how God wanted to grow Abraham. And it worked. Abraham was standing there primed to kill his son for love of God.

Here's what happened next: **"But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham!'" (v. 11)** First thing to notice is that Jesus was watching. He was right on cue. He knew the right moment to speak up. He had been watching. Secondly, he was emotionally involved. Jewish people only double

someone's name when it's a super emotional situation. For example when David's son Absalom died David said, "Absalom, Absalom, my son, my son." Do you see what's happening here? The Son of God, Jesus, the angel of the Lord, the preincarnate Christ has this extreme emotional outburst on Abraham's behalf. Why? I'll tell you. Jesus was in anguish right along with him. He was hurting right along with him and he could hardly contain his urgency to announce to Abraham: **"Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him."** (v. 12) Here's the message we see embedded in Jesus' actions: he loved Abraham enough to let him hurt, but not for a moment longer than was necessary.

Jesus doesn't sit back unemotional, and uncaring toward us. He's invested in us. He's involved. He cares. Let me make one final point from this story to prove that to you. This story is a dress rehearsal for parental love even more dramatic. God was rehearsing in Abraham the story of a Father who had so much love within himself that he would give his only Son, the one he loved, for a purpose so much greater.

And that spells the end for the practical deist in every one of us. When we understand what this story means, it is impossible for us to imagine that Jesus stands at a distance and is not involved in our lives. Jesus shows up all over history. He shows up in the Old Testament. He shows up in the New Testament. He shows up in your life. He tests you to grow you. And if you ever have any further doubts about how personally invested in you and the arc of your life God is, then just take another gander at a Father who arranged the wood, bound his son, and actually did slaughter his own Son for you. Amen.