



# “God’s Faithfulness”

Text: Genesis 22:1-14

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Early on in my ministry, I worked as a hospital chaplain. It was in the late 80s and I had asked to be assigned to the AIDS floor. There I found the patients I had expected to find, primarily gay men, people addicted to drugs, and the occasional hemophiliac. So many of their stories have stayed with me over the decades; but more than that, their stories challenged my faith and my understanding of this God that I had committed my life to serving. This God that I had been told was good and loving, kind, merciful and just; and yet where was the mercy for this mother and all the mothers who sat by their sons’ bedsides watching them die from a horrible and merciless disease as AIDS? Or for their sons who were simply trying to live their lives, loving and being loved?

I remember walking into one room to find a young man in his mid-twenties in the bed, his mother beside him. He was too weak to talk much, but the mother filled me in. He had contracted AIDS from his boyfriend who had then left him when he became sick. The siblings wouldn’t visit him because of the shame of his being gay and the father had disowned him. Only the mother, the deep, abiding, devoted love of a mother brought this woman here to sit vigil over her son without any support of family or loved ones. She spoke with bitterness in her voice. At one point, I tried to offer some comfort to her by saying something to the effect that God knows her pain as I thought of

Jesus on the cross. The woman responded by saying that of course God knew her pain as it was God that kept heaping upon her more and more pain. She spoke with such rage. All the sadness, the grief, the anger - at her other children and husband, at the disease, at a society that stigmatized homosexuality and AIDS, at her inability to save or even help ease the pain of this beloved son, came raging out toward God. Who else was there to blame, for all this suffering and injustice?

Throughout my years in ministry I have come across people who question how people can worship a God who could ask someone to sacrifice their son. No loving God could possibly ask such a thing. There are so many texts in the Hebrew Scriptures that challenge not only the unbeliever, but can be challenging to us as well.

This story should not be read in isolation from the preceding chapters about Abraham; for what we see throughout is a wavering of faith. There are times that Abraham responds with great faith. God tells Abraham to take his family and move to where God will direct and Abraham does so without dispute. A little later, God tells Abraham that he will have as many offspring as there are stars in sky. Abraham believes and is called righteous. However, we know that there are other times when Abraham acts out of doubt. Twice he tries to pass his wife off as his sister due to fear. So worried is he about producing an heir, he agrees to Sarah's plan for him to impregnate Sarah's handmaid, Hagar. We see through these instances that Abraham doesn't quite trust God to accomplish what God promised, or believe that God is a god of his word.

So, we find Abraham now being tested by God. God asks Abraham to demonstrate his faith by trusting him with his hopes, his future, his deepest longings, with his only son whom he loves more than life. At the beginning of this passage, we are told that it is a test by God, so we know that God had no intention of going through with the sacrifice. The angel of the Lord stays his hand. God never wanted child sacrifice after all, but what God did want was for Abraham to face his own conflicted and divided loyalties. God wanted Abraham to face his own conflicted and divided loyalties!! And isn't that what God wants for each of us? Aren't we also conflicted and divided in our loyalties?

We live in this world with all its noise clamoring in our ears. Yes, our families are the most important thing in our lives, but we also give our allegiance to money and things, even going out to eat can become something we are more devoted to than God. There are so many things that distract us from God, that we devote too much time and attention to. God wants us to love our families and to care what is happening to others and to do something about it when injustice is happening. God wants us to be healthy and happy and I don't believe we are called to a life of depravation. But I do believe we are called to a life of moderation and to a life where we recognize that everything that we are and that we have comes from the blessings of God and, ultimately, belong to God. We are simply the caretakers of those blessings - our children, our money, our time, our talents; they all belong first to God and are not really ours. This is what Abraham learns and now knows - that life WITH God is a gift, and God's blessing is freely bestowed. God will provide - generously, bountifully, wondrously. All he has to do is look up to see that God has been there all along, guiding his steps, directing his paths, and making a future for him.

But God knows something too. God learns that Abraham fears him. This is the first time the narrator describes Abraham's demeanor toward God in this way. Prior to this, the scripture depicts Abraham as listening to and obeying God, but here God experiences from Abraham more than just listening and obedience. Now there is respect, awe, and a healthy dose of fear and trembling that is appropriate to a divine-human relationship. Abraham learns to trust and to fear God and God proves that God can be trusted.

In the history of God's relationship with humans, God would demonstrate this time and again that God's commitment to fulfilling God's promises to Abraham and bringing about God's redemptive purposes would end up costing God dearly. For while Abraham's son was spared, God's own son would not. God would give up God's own Son to death.

It is hard to think about being tested by God, and it is hard to even know when we are being tested by God. Sometimes bad things happen because of our own choices, our own sin, as we see how Abraham and Sarah's choice of using Hagar as a surrogate causes problems. Sometimes our problems are caused by other people's sin or selfishness. Regardless of what leads us

into the fire, God wants to purify us so that in the end we are made more holy and able to enter into a closer and more intimate relationship with God. God wants us to have that relationship with God, one that is filled with love and obedience, but also fear, awe, and respect. How we get there, though, can be painful. There is no doubt about that.

At the same time I was working in the AIDS unit at the hospital, I was also working in the children's ward and in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. The week before Thanksgiving the PICU received three new patients. Three 6 year olds who all had cancer. All had parents that worried about the lives of their children. Kenny Jr. was one of those children. I spent a lot of time with the parents, Ken and Kris. Kris shared with me how she had been raised Catholic and had always believed in God and attended church up until her brother was killed in a car accident. She said that after that, she became angry at God and wasn't even sure there was a god. How could a good god let her dear, sweet, kind, brother die? Church, prayer, everything was left behind at that point.

Just before Christmas, her beloved son died. I wasn't on call that night, but I attended the funeral. As I hugged Kris after the service, I asked her how she was doing. She told me that while she was sad and grieving, she had found her way back to God through her son's death. She said she had to believe - for her son, for herself, and because in the midst of tragedy and loss, there was nowhere else to go but to God. In a strange way, in the midst of such monumental loss, she had found peace. She had found that God could be trusted with her son and with her future.

Because Christ died, our relationship with God has forever been changed. Whatever sin, whatever guilt, whatever grief or brokenness we carry, Christ has dealt with and abolished it in the cross. This story invites us then, to a posture of fear and awe as well as profound gratitude for God's faithfulness to God's covenant promises and the redemption we have through Christ. Let us believe and stand in awe and fear of the One who gives us life and blesses us as sons and daughters of the Divine. Amen.