

It is with some real uneasiness that I read this text today. It is one of the most haunting and difficult in all of scripture, but I think we do not honor God, or God's vision of our life together, if we avoid such difficult chapters of our story. Rather, I think we honor God and each other by wrestling together prayerfully, even as we acknowledge that we confront these stories across huge expanses of time and culture—and much here is mystery. I hope that in the process of wrestling we make explicit the belief that all of life—all that we feel, and imagine, and hold fast—what delights our hearts and what fills us with rage—it all belongs in this place—it's part of what we offer to God each week—asking that God will meet us where we live.

Will you pray with me?

Merciful God,

Stay close to us as we hear and ponder ancient, holy words—
words that are sometimes abrasive to our hearts.

Let your life take root in us and flourish—
let it banish our resistance and our fear—
until we become more than we imagined we might be.

We pray in the name of the one you sent
and by the power of the Spirit that keeps bringing us to life. Amen.

As we pick up the story of Abraham, he has lived a long and complicated life with God. After many years of journey, struggle and conflict, finally a son, Isaac, has been born to Abraham and Sarah, and so God's ancient promise of life and a future has opened. Today's passage story involves threat to that son's life. Listen for God's word to you this day as it comes in, through, and around these texts:

Genesis 22:1-19

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He 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."

So 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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then 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." Abraham 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. Isaac 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?” Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. When 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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He 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.” And 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. So 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.”

John 3:16-17

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Sermon: “Hard Stories”

For three days, Abraham and Isaac journey together, not knowing their destination. The text is clear that the love between them is deep. They call to each other as father and son, but unanswered questions hang in the air. They carry what will be necessary to make a burnt offering, but Abraham is not able to tell Isaac where the lamb for the offering will come from—Abraham says only that God will provide.

There is tension in this story that cannot be resolved. It is almost unbearable to hear because it sounds as though God is using an innocent youth as a pawn in an elaborate bluff, at the terrifying risk of that young man’s life. Two things we need to remember: We need to remember that this story emerged and was shaped in a context of surrounding cultures where the kind of sacrifice prohibited in this text, actually was practiced. So, in its early history this passage may have served as much to say who God is *not*, as it did to say who God is.

It also is worth noting that nothing here suggests that God knows from the beginning what the outcome of this encounter will be. What is at risk in this story is the promise God has made to bless all of creation through a family that begins with Abraham and Sarah. The one under threat in Genesis 22 is the only child of that particular promise—so it is not only the futures and hopes of Abraham and Sarah and Isaac which are at play

here—God’s very identity and purpose also hang in the balance. God, too, is vulnerable in this exchange. It may be that the test is unspeakable because the underlying promise is beyond words. God must know if Abraham will live in trust.

Stories of testing in the Bible, whether of individuals or of God’s people as a whole, seem always to serve as invitations for the parties involved to grow deeper in trust. So it may be that the pivotal moment of this account is not the moment when the angel instructs Abraham not to harm the boy. It may be that the crucial moment in this story occurs earlier—at the point when Abraham declares to Isaac that God will provide. Abraham cannot predict what is about to happen but he has come to know the faithfulness of God. This man who has not always been faithful himself, has learned whom to trust when the future is on the line.

Let me say I don’t blame you if you resist sifting through the offense of this story to experience the gift it might offer, but I do think that there is blessing for us here, if we are willing to open our hearts to it.

The question I find at the heart of this story is “Will we trust what we love most to God?—Can we imagine that God is still at work in the world, still providing for us, when those we love most are threatened or even lost to us?”

I don’t know what your experience has been but the setting when I have come close to living into that question has always been a hospital.

In 1993, I was in the early months of pregnancy when my husband became strangely ill. It took three days for the doctors to decide to do exploratory surgery, when they couldn’t locate the source of a raging infection. When they did operate they found that Lee had developed gangrene from an atypical infection of his appendix. But the moment that is fixed in my memory most vividly is of standing in the doorway of his hospital room, waiting for someone to come and take him to the operating room. The surgeon had told me earlier that he did not know what he would find, or what the outcome would be. As I stood there waiting, looking at the man I have loved since I was 17, I was overwhelmed by the sense that *as much as I love Lee, God loves him even more.*

There was no accompanying sense of assurance that Lee would live—only an awareness that Lee was held by a love broader and deeper than my own.

And in that moment, at least, that was enough.

We cling so tightly to the gifts that have sustained us in the past and the hopes we have for the future—and surely we are meant to cherish each other—but God invites us to trust in a love that is stronger even than death, a love that has the power to sustain us in the most devastating of circumstances.

Love is the lens through which we are invited to see even the most difficult portions of the Biblical witness; it is the webbing that runs from the earliest chapters of Genesis to the last words of the Revelation. Jesus said that all the law and the prophets hang on the commandments to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind—and to love your neighbor as yourself. So it always is appropriate to ask, when confronting a difficult passage of scripture: “How does this passage speak to us of the love of God and the love of neighbor?”

Genesis 22 speaks of a love that can be trusted against all appearances—a love to which God is radically committed—a love for the world. We heard that in the final speech God made to Abraham, saying, “by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves”. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac are vessels or conduits for God’s blessing to be poured out to the *nations*.

What is described here is a radically inclusive love. I heard someone say this week that we hear the word “nations” we should substitute “all the groups that make us uncomfortable, all the folks we don’t want to hang out with, all the persons who seem dangerously different.” Those are the people blessed by Abraham’s faithfulness.

And those are the people for whom Jesus died. We heard that a moment ago in a passage so familiar that we sometimes see hand-lettered road signs that just list the citation: “John 3:16”. It may be the first piece of scripture any of us memorized. “For God so loved the world...” But in the familiarity of these words, it’s easy to miss their radical claim, for the word “world” in John doesn’t call to mind a picture of our beautiful planet as seen from space.

One commentator explains it this way: “World, [or kosmos], in John refers most often to *those who are at odds with Jesus and God.*” God wasn’t born in a stable for the sake of some “in” group; God so loved *the world—the nations—the ones who even now who are missing out—*.

So the attachment we feel to the persons we love most in the world—that's just a shadow of what God feels for the whole confused world.

And the testing Abraham is described as bearing in this story? In Jesus, God bore the force of that test in God's own triune life—the story of Jesus' life cannot be fully told without reference to his temptations. So when we look at Jesus' we see the fulfillment of the promise that nothing we could ever do is enough to separate us from God's love. God's love is stronger than the world's resistance.

Friday evening I was driving home—an hour late, but nearly to my last turn when I saw a woman walking by the road, in an area where there is no safe place to walk. She had a backpack and a large cloth bag slung over her shoulder, as well as a black plastic trash bag, probably 2/3 full, which she was dragging behind her on the ground. It was the trash bag that really caught my attention as I rushed by—surely if she dragged it very far it was going to disintegrate and she was going to lose whatever was inside.

I am embarrassed to admit that it was not an automatic impulse to turn around—I was ready to be home—but I knew I would not be able to eat dinner in peace if I didn't stop. So I changed directions and rolled down the passenger window. I asked her if she needed a ride somewhere, and she nodded as she began to cry.

She was fleeing from a man who had sent her to the emergency room once already this week and looked like he might be ready to do it again—so, when she had seen an opening, she had grabbed what she could and left, but her vehicle had run out of gas after she made it down the mountain.

She did not need much from me, just a ride to her parents, some conversation about her situation, and a referral to Helpmate. It hardly delayed me at all.

But her gratitude for such a simple human response was a reminder I needed—a reminder of our call to push past the resistance we feel and walk toward the situations we would rather avoid: the person in need, the difficult passage of scripture, our own hard questions—we walk toward them because that's where we meet God. When we walk toward suffering, God shows up. And those encounters remind us why we're here.

For God so loved the world, that he sent his own beloved Son—and now, by the blessing and breath of the divine life within us—God sends us, too into that beloved world.

God asks us to trust in divine promises, even when all of the evidence seems to point another way. And God gives us the privilege of participating in bringing those promises to life.

May God's love continue to overflow from this community—