

As a country we’ve been talking about death more frequently than we typically do. I know that one night when I listened to the national news it sounded like a reading of the day’s obituaries. That was rather telling. In some ways it was heartening to feel like WE – everyone in the country – are concerned about people who have died and want to know what is being done to honor their lives. . . . But in other ways it was very disheartening to think that most of the deaths were tied to racist, unnecessarily violent responses to situations that shouldn’t have led to anyone’s death. . . . And I say that as a white person who knows she has more privileges than many other people will ever enjoy, in a culture that is geared toward doing right by folks like me. So if I can see that the systems and structures that work to my benefit every day are making daily life a horrific nightmare for millions of my fellow citizens – then things must be pretty bad. Because quite frankly I’ve been ignoring these very same problems and disparities all of my life from inside my nice, white bubble of delusion. But lately, I have been hearing the sound of “stretching” and “popping” as my nice, white bubble of delusion has been breaking up. . . . Perhaps you’ve been experiencing something similar in your life this Summer.

So in these days of new levels of awareness and fresh perspectives it seems particularly hard to focus on Abraham’s unquestioning response when God told him to sacrifice his son, Isaac; and the apostle Paul’s boasting about sufferings, and musing over who would die for a good or righteous person – much less billions of sinners as Christ did. Right now it’s hard to handle all the emotional baggage that comes with these scripture passages. But it can also be hard to simply understand what is going on in these passages. To get a basic understanding of their content. But I think it will be fruitful to try to understand.

We will start by trying to sort out what is going on in the reading from Genesis. To try to understand why God would be testing Abraham in the first place – and why God does NOT tell Abraham that this is a test. We, the readers of Genesis, are told up front that God tested Abraham – but God did not tell Abraham that he was being tested. What was the purpose of the test? For God to ascertain if God could trust Abraham. To find out exactly how faithful Abraham would be to God. Since we are not contemporaries with Abraham, we need to tune in to some basic understandings that he probably held about his faith. Abraham would have known that the covenant God had made with the Hebrew people was that God would be their god, and they would be God’s people. One part of living into that covenant and maintaining that relationship as God’s people involved the traditional and ritualistic belief that a faithful Hebrew person would dedicate or give their first born son to God. So did Abraham “hear” that he needed to dedicate his son Isaac to God in this sacrificial situation? And was Isaac “technically” Abraham’s first born son?

Well, yes and no. Ishmael was actually Abraham's first born son; but Isaac is definitely the ONLY son in Abraham's life at this point in time. So if God was asking Abraham to give a son to God – then it would have to be Isaac. But the other thing to understand about the “dedicating your first born son to God” tradition was that the Hebrew people also believed that God could accept a substitute sacrifice. In fact as we read through this passage it becomes quite apparent that Abraham must have believed that GOD would not only *accept* a substitute sacrifice for his beloved Isaac, but that it would be God who would *PROVIDE* that substitute sacrifice. And Abraham might have assumed that based on the promises God had already made about Isaac's future. That could explain why Abraham set out with Isaac and his servants to go to Moriah without a sheep; and why he even TOLD Isaac – who specifically ASKED his father Abraham why they didn't have a sheep for the burnt offering – that God would provide the sheep. . . . But if Abraham was able to put a rope around Isaac because they BOTH believed God would still be sending a sheep any time now – it seems to me that Abraham AND Isaac had already proven that they were like next, next level faithful and obedient, and TOTALLY trusted God. But that's my way of thinking about things, and obviously not God's way. Because God apparently *had* to wait until Abraham's knife was drawn before determining that Abraham was faithful enough to be trusted. And if we presume this is God's way of thinking, then the good news that came from this was that Abraham passed God's test, and God was then able to move forward with confidence.

Although that leaves me wondering: what else is God not so sure about? Or is it a good thing that God seems to be learning more about Abraham as their relationship goes along? It does seem wise of God to test things out to see if adjustments need to be made. A living God would need to do that, right? . . . But I also wonder why Abraham didn't offer to take Isaac's place. Why didn't Abraham offer himself as the substitute sacrifice? Would that have been any less traumatic for Isaac? I mean, is it worse to be put in the position of being asked *to sacrifice your father*, than it would be to be placed in the position of *almost being sacrificed by your father*? Or did Abraham know in his heart of hearts that if he actually had to sacrifice Isaac he would have died along with his son?

Of course more thoughts cross my mind when I go on to read our passage from Romans. Because here it sounds like sacrificing Jesus was a test for God. And it is a little too similar to God's testing of Abraham: would God be able to see it through to sacrifice Jesus in order to prove God's love for humanity? That God should take God's own dear son Jesus, whom God loves, to Jerusalem to sacrifice him there. And in that sacrifice would God die for the ungodly? Was God sure that God could do that? And why would God test God by doing this? Because there really is no “substitute sacrifice” for this test, is there?

Why does God's love for humanity need to be tested by this particular sacrifice? Has God's relationship with humanity grown and increased in breadth and depth since the time of Abraham? Why does the sacrifice of Jesus have to be the access point of grace? We could just as easily ask why the sacrifice of George Floyd had to be the tipping point to initiate systemic change in our country. Is this another sacrificial test that God has set before us? Can God trust us to respond faithfully to this test?

May God find us to be faithful and trustworthy.

Amen.