

Instead
Gen 22: 1-14

Over the past 40 years, I have had the opportunity to work for several different employers. In addition to being a minister of the Gospel for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I was a church groundskeeper, a fast food worker, an automotive tire installer, a dump truck driver, a laborer in a foundry, a boat mechanic, a building automation designer and the owner of an alarm consulting company. Most of the bosses I had were a pleasure to work for. They were kind, compassionate and expected nothing more than an honest day's work for the wages that were paid. Yet there were a few that were just the opposite. They were demanding, self-serving and hard to please, and they were anything but easy to work for. Looking back at those employers, I realized there was one thing that distinguished the good ones from all the rest. The best ones would not ask an employee to do something they would not be willing to do themselves.

If you have ever worked for such a person count your blessings and thank God for their good nature. One of the best ways for a supervisor to gain respect is by demonstrating a willingness to consider those they oversee as a team member rather than a paid worker under their control. Few things will make an employee more angry or disappointed than being treated in a condescending or demeaning way. Those of us who find ourselves in a position of authority should hold that in high regard.

Never ask someone to do something that you would not be willing to do yourself. That is incredibly good advice for anyone in a position of authority. That is a fundamental principle that extends beyond the workplace to other areas of our life. It will strengthen a relationship between husband and wife, between a parent and a child, between siblings and even between friends. It is also very Biblical, as it is closely related to the second greatest commandment of Jesus as quoted in the Gospels of Mathew and Luke - do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is a fundamental building block of a deep and loving relationship between people and with God.

The Scripture passages we just heard reveal much about the God we love and serve. From beginning to end, we find again and again that the Bible reveals that God is perfectly just, perfectly good, and perfectly compassionate and these passages are perfect examples. One thing is certain, and that is we can have absolute confidence that God will not and does not require something of us that would compromise or violate those qualities. That would include asking us to do something we are incapable of doing or to do something He would not be ready to do. When God is leading us or asking us to do something difficult, how will we know if we are up to the task? Where will we find the strength to do it? The God we love and trust tests our faith so that we can know.

The narrative of Abraham and Isaac is one of the most powerful examples of human faith and trust in God in all the Scriptures. The world's three largest religions all hold Abraham in high regard, for Christians, Jews and Muslims alike consider Abraham as the father of their faith. Abraham's faith journey began with a twofold promise God made to him as a young man. At the time, Abraham had no children since his wife Sarah was unable to conceive. He had adopted a servant- Eliezer- to be his legal heir. One day God appeared to Abraham in a vision and said "do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward".

At first glance, Abram's response seems less than admirable. Instead of falling on his knees in humble submission and praising God for visiting him, he does quite the opposite and asks God a pointed question. Lord God, what will you give me, seeing that I go childless? The heir of my house isn't even my own son. Either Abram saw God as a mythical genie released from the bottle, ready to grant three wishes, or else he believed that God was speaking to him in truth. Do you wonder how you and I would respond if God spoke to us?

God knew Abram's heart, and led him outside and made a two-part promise: look towards heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be. Then a few verses later in 15:18 comes the rest- "to your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river – the river Euphrates.

That piece of land is the most sought-after piece of real estate on the earth. There are numerous passages of Scripture that identify its boundaries even more specifically. It is a tiny piece of land, smaller than the state of New Jersey. It is known as the Promised Land, and it is called that because God promised that it would be given to Abraham's descendants. Today Jews and Muslims are still fighting over who God gave it to and the right to occupy that piece of land. You might remember what happens next. Years go by, Abram is 86 years old and he still doesn't have children with his wife Sarah. Knowing how desperately Abram wanted a child of his own, Sarah suggests that their servant Hagar might bear a child for him. Hagar becomes pregnant, a male child is born and they name him Ishmael.

Another 13 years pass by and God appears to Abram once again. Abram, I will make you a father of many nations. I will give to you and your descendants after you land I promised you earlier. As for Sarah your wife, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her and she shall be a mother of many nations. And from this time on, you will be known as Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor on many nations.

Abraham's reaction is troubling, and it was much the same as the first time he encountered God. He did not drop to his knees and worship the presence of Almighty God. The Bible says he did fall on his face, but only because he was laughing. Shall a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? And shall Sarah, who is 90 years old bear a child? Once again God knew Abraham's heart, as well as his finite human mind. Abraham's questions were answered in no uncertain terms. Yes. A child will be born to you and you are to name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him and his descendants after him. It will be an everlasting covenant. Less than a year later Isaac was born, just as God had said.

Fast forward another 20 years. God calls on Abraham again. Abraham, you know that son that you wanted for all those years? Your only son Isaac whom you love? I want you to give him back to me. BTW, Muslims believe it was Ishmael that he was to sacrifice. This time, Abraham's reaction is different. He didn't complain to God that he was childless or fall on his face laughing because what God had promised him sounded so impossible. This time he simply listened.

Three days later his faith would be put to the ultimate test. Just a split second before he would plunge the knife into the heart of his only son, the son whom he loved more than everything and anything else, his only begotten son, the angel appears and says stop! Take the life of the ram over there I have provided for you instead. Such a story makes little sense to those who do not love God. Why would God make someone wait 100 years to give someone a special gift and then ask for it back? Why would God test someone's faith like that? And where did Abraham get that kind of faith? How do we answer such questions and objections?

Part of the answer lies in the principle I shared earlier. God does not ask us to do something He would not be willing to do. Yes, God asked Abraham to do a difficult thing and give up his son, but it was not something that He was not also willing to do Himself. God knew firsthand what that would be like. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Like the ram that died instead of Isaac, Jesus died instead of us.

It took him 120 years, but Abraham believed God when he was told that the promised land would be given to Isaac and his descendants. Abraham believed that his young son would be spared to allow that to happen. Where does such faith come from? The same place our own faith comes from. It is a gift of God's grace. There is no good reason to doubt that our faith is just as genuine as that of Abraham, yet if you are like me we often do.

The fact is that we are in good company. Abraham had doubts, Sarah had doubts, and a host of others named in the Bible did as well. It was not until their faith was tested that they were able to overcome them and do great things for the kingdom. God tested their faith and God may test our faith also. Now we know why. To make it stronger. I pray for grace and mercy so that we can do great things as well. Amen