

Now, More Than Ever Gen 22: 1-14

Over the past 50 years, I have had the opportunity to work for several different employers. In addition to being a minister of the Gospel, at one time I was a church groundskeeper, a fast-food worker, an automotive tire installer, a dump truck driver, a laborer in a steel mill, a boat mechanic, a boat salesperson and a building automation and temperature control designer. I also worked for myself in three different businesses, a brush hogging service, a mobile boat repair service and an alarm consulting business. Most of the people I worked for were kind, compassionate and expected nothing more than an honest day's work for the wages that were paid. Yet others were just the opposite. They were demanding, manipulative and self-serving, and they were anything but easy to work for. Looking back at them, there was one thing that distinguished the best 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. Few things will allow an employer to gain more respect than demonstrating a willingness to consider an employee as their fellow worker rather than a paid servant under their control. And few things will make an employee more angry or disappointed than being treated in a condescending or demeaning way. Those of us who may find ourselves in a position of authority should hold this principle in high regard.

That principle extends beyond the workplace and can be applied to other areas of our life as well. Never ask someone to do something unpleasant that you would not be willing to do yourself. I believe that is good advice, and it applies to employee and employer, husband and wife, parent and child, between siblings and even between friends. It also extends to the relationship between God and His people. God is perfectly just, fair and compassionate, and the Scripture passage read for us earlier reveals that God does not require something of us that would compromise or violate those qualities. And at the same time, it also reveals a difficult thing for us to accept about the God we know and love. God tests our faith.

The story 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, and Christians, Jews and Muslims alike claim 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 to 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.

Once again, Abrahams reaction is troubling. His reaction was much the same as the first time he encountered God. He didn't drop to his knees and worship the presence of Almighty God, but 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 Abrahams 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 once 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. 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 chose to die 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 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 wasn't 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.

In just a few weeks, we will start a new season of ministry here at Millcreek. Our name will change slightly, but our mission will not. There will be times when we will wonder what God is up to, times when our faith might be tested. Let us never forget that our God does that so that it might become stronger, and we might become stronger. Let us pray for grace and mercy so that we can do even greater things for the glory of His kingdom. Amen