

5th Sunday after Pentecost 2023. Genesis 22:1-14 – there's something happening here.

Last week we heard in our Genesis reading that God had a deeper and better plan for Ishmael and his mother Hagar then first appeared. At first appearance it all looked pretty grim for Abraham's first born and his mother.

If we thought last week's reading was grim, then on the surface, today's reading from Genesis could seem horrific. Some years ago when attempting to get my head around the Hebrew language (which never happened), I double checked to see if v.2 could be translated any other way. But no, it says what it says, "take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on the one of the mountains that I shall show you."

For years I wondered what was worse; that God would tell Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, or that Abraham seemingly complied without protest.

However, this morning we will take a closer look at what is really happening here, and I hope these observations might help to hold our horror in tension with what is really remarkable and beautiful in this passage.

A lot has happened between Genesis 12, when we first meet this man called Abram when God called him out of Haran, and today's story which sort of works to book-end the stories that focus on Abraham's life. The text today asks us to keep this entire history of Abraham in mind when trying to understand what God is doing here.

The passage starts "after these things" (v.1), so the story today is set against the backdrop of all that has happened in the previous 10 chapters of Genesis, but particularly against the backdrop of last week's story of the casting out of Ishmael.

The writer of Genesis links the stories of Abraham's sons – both of whom Abraham was asked to sacrifice don't forget.

Linked by the time of day, both passages say, "Abraham rose early". Linked by a journey somewhere for the act to take place. For Ishmael a desert, for Isaac a mountain.

And, just as in last week's story about the casting out of Ishmael, the ending is not what we expected. Neither Ishmael's nor Isaac's life was ever in peril. They are both masterpieces of suspenseful Hebrew story-telling and need to be read together.

Throughout the previous 10 chapters of Genesis the pressing question is that of offspring. How will Abraham produce a son if Sarah is unable to conceive? So we as readers are relieved when first we have Ishmael, then Isaac, then back to only Isaac, and now, in the early verses of today's text, it appears that we will have none at all. How will God fulfill his promise to Abraham and Sarah?

Which brings me to what I think is an even deeper thing that God is achieving here.

This deeper sub-theme is the wavering faith of Abraham. Like every single one of the people chosen by God in both the OT and the NT, Abraham is human and flawed. Sometimes he is Mr. Faithful, as when he responds to God without hesitation, packing up and leaving his home in Haran. Back in Gen 15:6 "Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness."

At other times though, he panicked a bit. Twice, out of cowardice, he tried to pass his wife off as his sister and Sarah ended up in the bedroom of the local ruler (Gen 12:10-20, 20:1-18). And, so worried about producing an heir, he allows his wife to talk him into sleeping with another woman not his wife.

Through all the chapters in Genesis about Abraham up to this point (12-21), there are signs that Abraham still doesn't quite trust God to accomplish what he has promised. Including last week's passage where his initial response to the casting out of Ishmael was that it was "evil in his eyes."

God spoke to him and said that Ismael and Hagar will not die, rather Ishmael will also become the father of an entire nation. In today's text, in a way very similar to last week's passage, God tests Abraham one last time to bring his faithfulness to fulness. Abraham has now seen how faithful God was regarding Ishmael, the son of the slave. God says to Abraham, do you trust me with the son of the promise?

In the very opening lines of today's passage it says, "After these things [the things about Ishmael] God tested Abraham" (v.1). So from the very first we know that this is a test, not a

command. God never intended to allow Abraham to go through with it. God wanted Abraham to confront his own conflicted loyalties. But what a test! Which Abraham passes with flying colours! Notice that, unlike last week, Abraham obeys instantly and makes no comment about how “it is evil in my eyes.”

The test serves its purpose. Abraham now knows, in the most profound way, that life with God is a gift and God’s blessing is freely bestowed. He need not do anything – God will provide like he provided the ram – generously, bountifully, wondrously. All he has to do is look up, not into himself, and see that God has been there all along, guiding his steps, directing his paths to this very place and, above all, making a future for him.

Something changes between Abraham and God that day. Abraham learns to trust and fear God. God is not a tame lion! And God proves that God can be trusted. In the entire history of God’s relationships with human beings, God proves this time and time again.

So this is not a story about human sacrifice, this is a story of trust. Not a story about a God who wanted human sacrifice, but a God who *prevented* human sacrifice. It is the story of the God who loved Abraham and wanted Abraham to trust him.

It is the story of the God who wanted the sacrifice, not of Abraham’s son, but of Abraham’s heart. As David wrote in Psalm 51 some 800 or so years later

“the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit,
a broken and contrite heart O God,
you will not despise” (v.17).

Just as with Abraham, what God wants is our hearts – nothing else. Nothing else between us and him. We have nothing else in our lives that God didn’t give us in the first place; children, land or property, jobs, a building to sleep in, a life in a peaceful country, our very breath.

God gave us all of these things. We have nothing in our hands that God did not create – and could not create again. Our thoughts are not his thoughts, and our ways are not his ways. They are far higher than we can possibly comprehend. But we are his children and he is our God, and more than anything else, he loves our love for him.

In fact, God's commitment to fulfilling his promises to Abraham and bringing about his purposes would end up costing God very dearly. Whilst Isaac was exchanged for a ram in a thicket, we were exchanged for a blemish-less lamb on the cross. God provided.

For while Abraham's son, Isaac, was spared, God would give his own son, Jesus, up to death. The most amazing act of God's provision in all of history. Providing salvation, restoration, and blessing to all the nations of the world for all time.

Because Christ died, our relationship with God has forever been changed. Whatever sin, whatever brokenness, whatever guilt we carry, Christ has dealt with it and abolished it in the cross. This wonderful story from Genesis invites us again to fall on our knees in gratitude and awe to our Father's faithfulness to his covenant promises to his children and the redemption we have through them.