

I am going to say a word, and the moment I say the word I want you to recall a time in your life that this word brings to your mind.¹ Are you ready? The word is “tested.” Tested! Do you remember when you were tested, when you were tempted to do something wrong?

I see a student taking an important exam and blanking on the answers. But it’s a “take home exam...” Tested!

I see a person who is struggling to pay her bills, while eyeing her mother’s assets, for which she is the guardian. Tested!

I see a Virginian with political aspirations who called the institution of slavery an “abominable crime,” a young man who then inherited enough slaves to make his Monticello plantation profitable and fund his run for office. Tested!

Will you look back in time even further to another time of testing, an even more serious kind of testing? The person who is being tested is Abraham. God had promised Abraham that he would be the Father of Many Nations. God had made this promise to Abraham and his wife Sarah when they were already far too old to have children. But now Abraham has not just one child—not just one son—but two.

The oldest child, Ishmael, Abraham had fathered with Hagar, his wife’s maid, because it had seemed like God’s promise would NEVER come to pass. Having a child with Hagar had been his wife’s idea, so it wasn’t as if Abraham and Hagar had snuck around behind Sarah’s back. In fact, there was a law then, a custom that said an oldest son of a man and his wife’s maid would be heir, just as if he were the couple’s own child. But then Sarah got pregnant too and his second son Isaac had been born.

Talk about tested! All Abraham had heard from his wife after Isaac was born had been jealousy—so much jealousy that finally Abraham had agreed to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham had thought that this would have been the end of the mess, but NO. Now God was testing Abraham. God had said to him, “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...”



Caravaggio, The sacrifice of Isaac

I want you to notice the fine print here. God did NOT say “sacrifice Isaac,” he said to “offer him” as a sacrifice. You and I know how the story ends, but Abraham doesn’t seem to be aware of this nuance—or does he? However, something that Abraham definitely would have been aware of was that God was being ironic.

Imagine that you are Abraham. You know that Isaac isn’t your only son—he’s not even your oldest. You know that Isaac isn’t even your *best* son—Isaac’s sickly and slow and strangely passive; a mama’s boy, really.² And you’re already feeling guilty about sending Ishmael away. And then God not only reminds you of this situation, God instructs you to sacrifice your only remaining son, to kill your only remaining offspring. Tested!

Perhaps if Abraham hadn’t been feeling so guilty he might have argued with God. After all, Abraham had had some practice in arguing with God when God’s plans hadn’t sounded so, well, ethical. Remember the time when God had decided to destroy two entire cities and everyone in them?³ Abraham had dared to ask God then, “Would you destroy the righteous with the wicked?” Yes, Abraham had had some practice arguing with God. But he didn’t argue with God this time, did he? Tested!

What could be more unethical or unfathomable than being asked to murder another person? I know that you know that the locals in the land at that time sacrificed their eldest sons to appease their gods. But Abraham was a righteous man who knew that God would not condone murder. Make no mistake about today’s lesson: what God seemed to instruct Abraham to do is wrong now and would have been wrong then.

The thing that has made this story so highly debated for thousands of years is that it so accurately defines being tested. Abraham was asked to murder his son, an act which is so clearly wrong by God’s and by human standards. Yet God himself seemed to have told Abraham to do this great wrong.

Here’s what Abraham did. He set out for Mount Moriah the next day with Isaac and fire wood and two servants. Then, when they arrived at the foot of the mountain, Abraham told the servants to wait, that he and Isaac would be right back.

We don’t hear Abraham’s thought process during this time. We don’t know whether Abraham has worked out that God doesn’t intend for him to actually kill his son. We don’t know whether Abraham finally owned up to the fact that Isaac was not the child that he had expected, and accepted

him for the gift that he truly was. What we do know is that after Abraham laid Isaac and the wood upon the altar and was ready to sacrifice Isaac, THAT'S when an angel restrained Abraham's hand.

We remember Abraham to this day for his faithfulness to God for being willing to sacrifice Isaac. What we don't so readily remember is that there is one child too many in this story, one child too many because Abraham and Sarah did not wait upon the Lord to fulfill his promise. We assume that the subject of Abraham's testing is whether to kill Isaac, but in the end the outcome of the test is that Abraham had to choose one or the other: the child of God's promise—as unlikely as Isaac seemed for the role—or the child of Abraham's own plan.

In the end God made Abraham the Father of Many Nations as he had promised, and he did so through BOTH of Abraham's sons. Ishmael became the father of Islam, and Isaac became the father of Judaism. It I wonder if Abraham realized just how—with this test—both Abraham and God were redeeming Abraham's past unfaithfulness in pre-empting God's plan?



Chagall, The sacrifice of Isaac

There are many interpretations of this lesson to ponder. I can't help but think of our very own Church of the Resurrection. I hope that, having been willing to sacrifice our beloved church building completely to comply with what we believe is God's desire for us to build affordable housing, that we have passed our test. It's hard for us to tell, though, from our vantage point. For instance, did you know that the very spot where God spared Abraham's son Isaac is where his own son Christ Jesus was later crucified?⁴ I suggest you take your scripture insert home and ponder THAT this week.

On a more pragmatic level, the today's lesson challenges us, when we are being tested, to look BACK on our desires—to look back before moving forward in **blind** faith when we think we understand what God is instructing us to do. This examination of our own desires is especially important when we think we hear God telling us to do something that is wrong. Because GOD never wants us to do something wrong.

Today's Old Testament lesson shows us that God can redeem our poor choices, if we let him and if we are faithful. Today's lesson also teaches us that our own attempts to speed up God's plans, our own attempts to provide for ourselves instead of relying on God's provision, don't turn out the way that we anticipate. But if in the end we are faithful, God can take a seemingly broken promise and mend the situation, to the extent that we pass God's test.

¹ I take as my inspiration for the format of this sermon the sermon on Gal. 1:11-24 by the great preacher Fred. B. Craddock entitled "[Praying Through Clenched Teeth](#)," as published in *How to Preach a Parable* by Eugene L. Lowry, pp. 142-173.

² Herbert W. Hain, "Prologue," in Mishael Caspi, *Take Now Thy Son: The Motif of the Aqedah (Binding) in Literature*, Vol. 5 (North Richland Hills, Tex.: BIBAL Press, 2001), argues persuasively that Isaac likely had serious congenital disabilities. Concerning Isaac's age here, Hain says that [Flavius Josephus](#) thought that he was 25 and [Talmudic sources](#) say he was 37.

³ See the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in [Genesis 18](#).

⁴ 2 Chronicles 3:1 identifies the location of Isaac's would-be sacrifice as the place where Solomon later built the temple to the Lord. Mount Moriah is just to the west of the Mount of Olives, and there is some archaeological evidence to suggest that the place where Jesus was crucified was atop Mount Moriah.