

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, '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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.'

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.' So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

**Scripture intro** (to be read before the scripture reading):

Ever since we met Abraham in chapter 12 of Genesis he's been waiting for a promised son to show up. Waiting a long, long time; decades for this promise to be fulfilled.

Last week we looked at how Sarah, Abraham's wife, used her slave, Hagar, to bring an heir into the world only to cast her away during pregnancy. We witnessed Hagar's faithfulness to the 'God who sees', her return and the birth of Ishmael. Scholars note that this was not necessarily an act of unfaithfulness on Sarah and Abraham's part to use Hagar to bring forth an heir. That was an accepted act in their society. It's simply part of the story.

Now, years later, after God makes clear that Sarah will mother a child, *the* child who will carry on the line of Abraham, Isaac is born. In time he is weaned, increasing the likelihood of his survival. Not wanting her son's inheritance to be shared with Ishmael, Sarah again demands that Hagar and Ishmael be cast out. This time God intervenes, telling a distressed Abraham to follow Sarah's wishes. And so they are driven out, with only a skin of water and some bread - exiled to fend for themselves. God assures Abraham that Ishmael, his oldest son, will also be the Father of a nation, but his contact with Ishmael and Hagar is severed completely. We never see or hear of them again. Now Isaac is seen as the only son.

## Sermon:

PART 1: Silence to hold the complexity, the horror, and the many questions this story raises. Notice what questions you have and how you feel that in your body.

We're going to look at the background of the text, consider the story carefully, and consider, along with our many questions, if it might have anything to say to us today.

PART 2: Background of the origin of this text -

Biblical professor and author Pete Enns reminds us that the book of Genesis, including this story, was being shaped into its final form by those living in the wake of the Babylonian Exile (586-539 BCE) hundreds of years after these stories may have taken place. The exile, this national catastrophe, shook ancient Israel to its core - with big questions being asked regarding God's faithfulness to them as a people. This context is essential to holding these complicated stories.

We also need to remember that Genesis is not a loose conglomeration of individual stories. They are all woven into each other.

Let's take a step back to the beginning of this book: God created Adam and not long after that creation there was disobedience and banishment. Fast forward a few chapters, and we meet Noah, a righteous man, who is chosen as a do over. But his story, too, turns away from righteousness not long after the ark was on dry ground. Finally Abraham is chosen - out of the blue - we have no idea why he is chosen by God, and yet God promises unconditionally, unilaterally, to make Abraham's name great and that he will be a father of a great nation.

This is brought about not by human works, but by God. It's God, who in their old age removes Sarah's barrenness and finally gives the couple a baby, when they're in their 90's.

These stories of Ab and Sarah make clear that God is in control; and God who unconditionally promises Abraham that his descendants will be like the stars in the sky and that the land upon which he is now an alien will one day belong to his offspring.

If you've been reading along with us, you might remember that 3 times - in chapters 12,13 and 15 God unconditionally makes this promise of descendants and land. Then, in chapter 17, the promise becomes a covenant, and has a condition laid upon it.

There, God tells Ab that he will be made exceedingly numerous, but requires something of Ab - the promise will take place only if all males are circumcised. This is new - the no strings attached promise now has a condition laid upon it: circumcision - A visible sign of God's tribe.

There was animal sacrifice offered in chapter 15 to seal the promise; foreskin sacrifice in chapter 17 to secure the covenant of descendants and land, and now, here in chapter 22, we have the ultimate sacrifice being asked of Ab - his son.

Remember - this story is being edited and Genesis, the book, is being shaped during a catastrophe, decades of Exile from their homeland, that left Israel unsure of their future and God's promises.

Those ancient Israelites, in exile, were confronted with the choice of radical trust that God would intervene for them as he had for Isaac and deliver them from dire circumstances.

### PART 3:

Radical trust that God will deliver - it's a theme that is here with Abraham, and continues through the biblical story. *Let's look at this story not only through our 21st C. eyes, but through the lens of a people confronted with the choice to radically trust God to intervene and deliver them from their enemies.* Remember - context matters.

In our story today, Ishmael, Ab's first born, is out of the picture. Now it's only Isaac, he is the only son. No safety net of progeny here.

Let's go through the story together - (p 15 in pew bible)

Notice - we're told the purpose of this story right off the bat - this is a test.

"God tested Abraham" (my mind starts asking questions like 'does God test us? What do I think of a God who tests? Can I trust that kind of God?')

But let's keep the lens of the early exiled reader in mind. They are living through a test, of sorts.

God calls "Abraham" and, unlike Adam and Eve, who hide in the garden, ashamed, Ab answers wholeheartedly "Hineni" - Here I am.

Pay attention to Ab's response - Hineni, Here I am, he says it three times in this story.

Hineni is a powerful Hebrew word - it's Moses' response at the burning bush, when he hears his name and turns to see. Moses says, Hineni. (Ex. 3).

It's young Samuel's response when he's awoken at night, hearing his name. Samuel responds: Hineni.

Those early listeners hearing the story in Hebrew would have heard the word Hineni and knew something big was about to happen - knew that Abraham was in for a life changing moment.

Hineni: Here am I.

Right away, when Ab responds in this wholehearted way to God, the story hints at Ab's faithfulness.

Next - Ab doesn't wait around - getting up early the next day and setting off.

3 days they travel - what was that journey like for Ab? So much time to think, to second guess that voice he heard. And yet he continues on.

He sees the place, tells the others to stay, saying 'the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' Notice the use of 'we'. Ab speaks of this act as an act of worship, and then they will return *together*. What might the exiled Israelites have heard there? This giving up of everything, of all hope, as an act of worship that they will endure, somehow, together?

We hear only one question from Isaac in this whole story - Father! Ah, there's our second Hineni from Ab - 'Here I am my son'. Ab gives Isaac his full attention.

'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'

PAUSE - as a parent I've been asked some hard questions, but I can't quite imagine this one...

'God will provide the lamb' Ab tells him. 'So the two of them walked on together'. What an image. Walking, side by side.

Ab builds the altar, lays the wood in order, and we're told "He bound his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood." Said so matter of factly. Take a moment and notice what's going on inside of you right now - all the questions you might be

wondering about. What did it take to bind him? Did Ab say anything to Isaac? Did Isaac put up a fight? Ab, how can you go through with this???

Ab reaches out his hand, and takes the knife to kill, to slaughter, his son.

‘Abraham, Abraham’!

Twice his name is called. “Here I am”. Hineni. Did he crumple in relief? Break down in tears?

“Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; *for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.*”

Ab doesn’t seem to miss a beat - grabs the ram who just happens to be tangled up in some bushes, and sacrifices him instead.

Listen to the final words of the angel, the angel of the LORD, to Ab - listen through the ears of those in exile, those desperate for freedom, wondering if they are soon to be no more.

*Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.*

Like Ab, those later Israelites, were confronted with the choice of radical trust that God would intervene for them as he had for Ab - and deliver them from dire circumstances.

Was this story one that those in exile fiercely held onto - remembering that God promised to make them - Ab’s descendants - are as numerous as the stars of heaven? Did they see themselves as living through a test, as Ab had?

**‘God’s command to Ab highlights the radical and risky nature of true trust in God.’** writes Enns.

Why this story? I'm still not quite sure what to do with it.

Holding it as an ancient story that's told in the context of this larger story of the beginning of God's people helps. A people who have started over again and again.

Every character in Genesis is complex - that's what I love about these stories - I can find myself in the jealousies, the shame, the disobedience, the looking to other gods to save me... Can I also see myself in Ab's mind-bending faithfulness?

This is a story of a God I don't understand, can't make sense of. Alongside that, can I, like Ab, still say Hineni when I don't understand? Can I, in radical trust, turn and give my wholehearted attention to the ones who call my name? Say 'Hineni' to humans and angels alike?

End the sermon with silence - go slowly and listen. What did Abraham need to listen to deeply to respond in the way he did? What do you need to slow down and hold, with care?

Silence is a time to listen.

References:

Enns, Peter and Byas, Jared. 2022. *Genesis for Normal People, 2nd ed.* Published by The Bible for Normal People, Perkiomenville PA.

[Episode 283: Pete Enns - Pete Ruins Genesis \(Part 3\) - The Bible For Normal People](#)