

It happens more than once in the Bible. An angelic visitor announces to a woman, who is well outside the normal child-bearing years, "You will conceive and give birth to a son. God will bless him and he will be a blessing to others." The woman does indeed give birth to a son, who grows in wisdom and stature. At some point the son undergoes a time of trial – God is proving and refining the chosen one. Sometimes the son triumphs. Sometimes fails. But through this life God changes the world. In the OT, this is the outline of the lives of Isaac and Samuel. In the NT, this is the outline of the lives of both John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ. Their life stories include threats and challenges; it was the Age of Sacrifice. With a sense of the sweep of history, let us consider the story of Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah in their old age. You are entitled to a shiver after hearing this story, which Jews refer to as the Akedah – the Binding-Up of Isaac. It's offensive ... and always has been. God forbid that we sink so low that the thought of father slaying son doesn't shock. The Akedah challenges our idea of a trustworthy God.

I am indebted to America's eminent scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Walter Brueggemann, for framing the Akedah as two kinds of paradox: the paradox of God's nature and the paradox of God's creation, our human nature. The Akedah frames both paradoxes nicely. The Divine Paradox is that God is both a **Provider** and a **Tester**. Like the math teacher who provides students all the problems in advance of the final exam, God presents Abraham with a test.

"You will sacrifice my gift to you and Sarah, the boy, Isaac."
The boy catches on pretty quick. Father ... The fire and the wood are here. But where is the lamb for the burnt offering? By the end of the passage, God is the **Provider**: Abraham takes the exam but before he finishes the only answer possible, an angel of the Lord stops him and God provides another answer: a ram caught in a thicket. 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." This is not the first time God has displayed the Tester-Provider Paradox to innocent humans. God provides Adam-and-Eve a paradise, but tests their obedience with the fruit of a forbidden tree. God tests Noah with the commissioning of an ark. But God provides deliverance after the flood and marks the occasion with a rainbow covenant. The paradox resurfaces in God's interactions with Moses, with David, with Esther, with Amos, and most egregiously with Job. Twice in the ministry of Jesus, once at the outset and again at the very end, God tests Jesus, who obeys, then God provides. God writes the test, then provides the answers. But the purpose of God's test is quite different from a mathematics exam: God tests in order to prove people's obedience and to define or refine their character. God puts people "to the test." God wants – even expects – people to live their best. Of course, people can see the test in advance: Everything God tests for is in scripture. For the most part,

Abraham has lived up to God's expectations.
 The relationship of Abraham to God
 is initiated by God. The story begins in Gen. 12:
 Now the LORD said to Abram,
*"Go from your country and your kindred
 and your father's house to the land
 that I will show you.
 I will make of you a great nation,
 and I will bless you,
 and make your name great,
 so that you will be a blessing."*
 Seems to me that God has already decided
 that Abe is the right one to found God's own nation,
 even before the story begins.
 Why test Abraham now to see what he's made of
 when the national lineage has been pre-ordained
 through Abraham's offspring?
 And why – WHY?! – put that lineage at risk
 by making Isaac the object of the test?
 Is God jealous of Abraham's love for Isaac?
 Brueggemann advises us not to waste time
 trying to figure God out.
 God will not be explained, only heard and obeyed.
 So, in the first place, the Binding of Isaac
 dramatizes the paradox that, in relating to humanity,
 God tests and God also provides.
 That's a divine prerogative. Deal with it.
 Brueggemann's second point is intriguing:
 human beings are a paradox to God, the Creator.
 That's the impression we get from Adam and Eve;
 God seems genuinely hurt that they eat the fruit.
 Jesus captures this paradox in the Prodigal Son:
 The father spies the prodigal returning from exile.
 'How do I act – do I curse my son or bless him?'
 It seems God doesn't know in advance
 whether people are trustworthy,
 a divine shortcoming
 which even bothered Calvin a fair amount.
 It contradicts the idea of an all-knowing God.

So, when Abraham sets off with Isaac
 to the mountain, the suspense is God's.
 The test is severe: sacrifice the miracle boy
 of yours and Sarah's old age.
 God is not punishing Abraham, or Isaac,
 neither of whom have done wrong.
 Nor is this a random act of God's mean-ness.
 God sets up the test because God
 really doesn't know how this will turn out.
 Abraham could back out at any point.
 Yet he shows every intention
 of carrying out the sacrifice.
 He trusts that God will provide a just resolution.
 Witness his answer to Isaac's innocent query:
*"God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering,
 my son."*
 It's a double-blind test.
 Abraham understands the what of the problem,
 but doesn't ask why,
 and has no sure answer how God will provide.
 God really doesn't know if Abraham will sacrifice Isaac.
 Is this horrific experiment justifiable?
 Well, Abe's track record is uneven on obedience.
 Sometimes he displays a strong-headedness
 that could be interpreted as
 "I'm God's pet. So I can get away with it."
 Abraham takes matters into his own hands
 pretty often. He is not God's most reliable servant:
 God calls Abraham to Canaan; he moves to Egypt.
 In Egypt, he passes off wife Sarah as his sister,
 which trips up the Pharaoh.
 (Abraham doesn't learn much from this.
 Later, he contends Sarah is his sister
 when he deals with Abimelech, another ruler.)
 At another time, Abe talks back to his nephew, Lot,
 who out of resentment moves to Sodom,
 a poor choice of neighborhood.
 Rather than trust God to protect Lot's family,
 Abe organizes a militia and rescues them.

The business of Hagar bearing Abraham a child is not God's idea, or Abraham's, but Sarah's. Sarah's behind the banishment imposed on Hagar during her pregnancy and again after Ishmael is born, putting them both at risk in the desert. (Caught off-guard, God has to smooth this over with a hasty promise to protect Hagar and Ishmael.) Most revealing of all his stunts, however, is Abraham's audacious bargaining to spare Sodom and Gomorrah from total destruction. "Lord, what if there are 50 good men? Will you spare Sodom? 45? 40? 30? 20? 10?" When it comes down to it, Abraham's scorecard of obeying God is just two: His willingness to move at God's command, and his devoutness. Time and again, God commands and Abraham pulls up camp for a strange land. Without God's prompting, Abraham sets up altars and worships God at each new place he comes to. In that sense, the Binding of Isaac is more of the same: **Take** your child ... **go** to the land of Moriah ... and **worship** me with a sacrifice. Abraham sets out to do exactly as God commands. The episode spins around to a palatable ending – God trusts Abraham and provides a substitute, in the form of a ram; the sacrifice is carried out. And the beloved son, Isaac, with all his progeny is forever bound to God, a living sacrifice. "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." The God who tests human obedience also provides the means of salvation. But where does the story leave Christians? Many see a parallel between Jesus and Isaac: God permits the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. That's the paradox of Son-of-God crucified – God suffers and dies.

The Garden of Gethsemane is close to Mt. Moriah, both geographically and spiritually. Jesus is God's love made flesh-and-blood. In that sense, God provides. In the Garden, Jesus prays out his uncertainty about what God expects of him. (I imagine Abraham experiencing the same uncertainty.) Jesus is betrayed, endures torture, and dies on a cross. In that sense, God tests. In the end, Abraham and Jesus submit to the test, trusting in God. Jesus descends to the dead for three days. On Easter, the resurrected Jesus proves to believers that death is not the final word. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* We call it the gospel of resurrection: Though dead by divinely ordained sacrifice, Christ lives. In our baptisms we are united with Christ's sacrifice. We keep telling the old, old story of Jesus because it's both horrible and wonderful, a story of testing and providing. ■ Does the God of the Binding seem any different to us from the God-of-Resurrected-Jesus? Certainly we can't conclude that God delights in child sacrifice. But before we shrug off this text as an ancient fable, too-far-removed from our times to teach anything, let's examine our sense of right and wrong where children are concerned.

We shudder at the cruelty God forces upon Isaac.
 But do we shudder just as much
 at the easy availability of alcohol, narcotics,
 and prescription drugs to our young people?
 Do we shudder at the epidemic of domestic violence
 that exploits and abuses parent-child relationships?
 Do we shudder at human trafficking which subjects
 mostly women and children to degradation?
 Do we shudder at the relentless global pursuit
 of cheap and yet-cheaper labor, some of it child?
 Our shoes and clothes are the load of wood
 we stack on the Isaacs and Esthers of the world.
 Do we shudder at the lives we lose in wars we wage,
 which extract a disproportionate toll on our youth?
 Do we shudder at the condition of the planet
 we are leaving our children?
 The Binding of Isaac is happening everywhere.
 The Age of Sacrifice is far from over.

CONCLUSION

After preaching on the Akedah,
 William Willimon shook hands
 with a worshiper who was agitated by the sermon.
 "I'll tell you what," the worshiper confided.
 "That story of Abraham and Isaac
 makes me I feel I'm near a real God,
 not the dignified, Rotary Club president
 we chatter about here most Sunday mornings.
 Abraham's God could blow a man to bits.
 His God could ask for everything from a person
 and then want more.
 I want to know that God."
 Do you?
 Our disjointed, disillusioned, disordered world
 needs the Great God of Abraham and Sarah,
 who will not be served without sacrifice.

Faith is not the one-dimensional motto of our coinage,
 "In God We Trust," but rather the faith of our Fathers.
 A simple piety that shows no awe of God's power
 is inadequate.

A rigid theology of atonement – God judges –
 that minimizes the providence of God is incomplete.
 Our self-confident, self-reliant, self-absorbed world
 needs the Great God who sent Jesus into the world,
 to die for our sins,
 a God who sows love freely and demands obedience.
 Amen.