**God said What?!**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**September 10, 2017**

Genesis 21: 1-3; 22: 1-14 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Our reading today is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible for our modern ears and hearts to hear and try to understand. Many preachers would choose not to read it or preach on it. Even while I have taken the leap to preach on it, I did change the schedule of weeks that it was to be covered. The lectionary was to be read next week, but it seemed a very inappropriate passage to read for our Kickoff Sunday, beginning our children’s ministry. The main problem we have with the story is that God asks Abraham to sacrifice his one and only son. His son who was to fulfill God’s promise that Abraham will be blessed with a long line of descendants. It begs the question, what kind of God is this? It does not fit with the understanding of the God we have come to know, who is loving, compassionate and forgiving.

So, as with much of the Bible, it may help to remember that it is a story which is not historical but like most stories contains truth for us and is told to convey that truth. This story started being told over 600 years after the time of Abraham, and it’s primary message is in the text, when Isaac asks where the lamb is for the sacrifice. Abraham responds, God will provide. There are many ways in the end, God provides. God stops Abraham from carrying out the sacrifice. God provides a ram for the sacrifice. God affirms Abrahams’ faithfulness. Abraham passes the ‘test’.

We are told it is a test. God is intentionally testing Abraham to see if he will do what God asks. And what a terrible thing God asks of Abraham! To take his only son, Isaac whom he loves, and offer him as a burnt offering. What do you do, when faced with two impossible choices, both of which seem wrong. Killing your son, or going against God? Abraham seems to choose following God. However, I can’t help but wonder, they travelled for three days to get to that mountain –that’s a long time to think. I would like to think that in that time, Abraham would have reflected on all that he had been through and experienced with God. In that reflection he would have realized that the God he had come to know and fear would not want him to sacrifice his son, who God had given to them in their old age. He would have known the clear message against child sacrifice among the People of God, the Israelites. He would have realized that Isaac’s life was more important than his, so I like to think that Abraham, was pretending to carry through with God’s request but in the end, if God did not stop him, Abraham would not do it, and face the consequences from God, even if that meant his death. This is what I propose happened for Abraham in that three day walk. So when Isaac asks, where is the lamb, Abraham truly believed, that God would provide. Abraham trusts God, the God he has come to know. Do we have that kind of trust in the challenges of our life? There is still the problem of the trauma that Isaac would have experienced. Would they have been able to reconcile that in the three day walk home? Or would Isaac not have much of a relationship with his father or God, for the rest of his life? There are parts of this story that seem unredeemable.

While this story is framed as a test from God, it is not a test like a temptation to sin. It is more like a challenge or test of skills or faith. When we say: “that tested your skills”, it means that challenged you. There are many times we are challenged in life, which can challenge our faith and trust in God. A child gets cancer, a parent dies in a tragic accident, the cloud of mental illness envelopes us, we experience abuse. There was an [awful story](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4864624/Man-tells-harrowing-moment-2-year-old-killed-Barbuda.html) this week, one of many, of a mother in Barbuda, during Hurricane Irma, who lost her two year old. Her roof had been blown off her house and she was holding onto a post in her house with one arm and her child in the other and the wind tore her child out of her arms. The child’s body was found the next day. It is tragic, and is more tragic to say that God took that child out of her arms. This is not the kind of God we believe in. These experiences are challenging to our faith. The message of this passage of scripture and of the Bible, is that God provides, God is with us. God grieves with us during these challenging times and is in the love and support we experience. God was in the compassion of the volunteer who first heard this story from the woman when she found her way to others after the storm. God isn’t the source of these challenges, or in the evil we experience, but they are opportunities for us to learn if we can put our full trust in God to be with us through these dark and challenging times.

One of the problems with this story of Abraham and Isaac, is that at face value, it is an awful story, and portrays a heartless, cruel God, and Abraham as not much better, willing to traumatize his son, in order to follow God. It is stories like this that can turn people off religion and cause them not to believe in God. I don’t think anyone wants to believe in this kind of God. I know I can’t believe in a God like the one in this story. For those who have left the faith because of stories like this or other stories or experiences they heard or have had in the church, there can be ways to reach them. These past few weeks I have been following a [story](http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/05/us/robert-lee-iv-resigns-church-pastor-mtv-vma-confederate/index.html) of a pastor, Robert E Lee IV, a descendant of the Robert E Lee of the Confederate army. He was on the MTV awards introducing the mother of Heather Heyer, the woman killed by white supremacists at the Charlottesville protest. In his introduction, Pastor Robert denounced white supremacy and racism in the context of his faith. Some in the community and in the United Church of Christ congregation in Winston Salem, where he pastored, were not supportive of his comments and so he resigned. There was a [post](https://twitter.com/roblee4/status/904372953206456320) on his twitter identifying that he had to resign and asking for prayers, which I shared on our Facebook page, that showed the impact that his statement and resignation was having on unchurched people. Here is a sample:

I don't know that I believe in anything, would love to have a conversation with an exchange of ideas. I'm open-minded and learn from others

We may not be of the same faith, but I applaud your conviction, sir. Best of luck.

Reverand, your witness in speaking truth to power is being heard even by strangers like me. Thank you for your courage.

We never know the impact of our words and actions. There can be challenging messages in the Bible, and from the church that have turned people off over the years. Our challenge is to counter those messages with love and compassion, and by the example of our lives. May we be able to make sense of challenging passages together and draw the truth out that is meaningful and important for us. May we trust that God is with us in the challenges and know God’s presence in the difficult times in our lives. Amen.