



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 1ST LENT
GENESIS 22:1-18 AND MARK 1:9-15
FEBRUARY 21, 2021

“TESTING...1...2...3”

Poor Isaac. One of three “patriarchs” of the Jewish faith – along with his father and his own son, is also the one with the least compelling story – little do we know except that he was a son and a father, a bridge between the stars of the Genesis show - Abraham and Jacob. As a child he was teased by his half-brother Ishmael, so his mom Sarah comes to his defense and has Ishmael and his mother Hagar banished from the household for picking on him.

As a grown man he is not allowed to choose a wife for himself – no sir, a servant of his father, at his mother’s behest, fetches one for him from among the kinfolk back home - although the Bible tenderly reports that it was a good marriage and he loved his wife Rebecca. As a father, he is duped by his second-born Jacob and gives away a blessing that should have gone to his firstborn Esau. And then there is the near sacrifice of him. In Jewish tradition it is referred to as “*akedah*” – the binding. But even then, the story begins by saying “*God tested Abraham.*” Abraham! And what of poor Isaac - this was nothing to him but a camping trip with his dad? Isaac is the Charlie Brown of the Old Testament – always something going wrong!

Yet this is a breathtaking, heart-rending story. There would come a day when Israel – centuries removed from its patriarchs but living in the land promised by God to them, would distinguish and distance themselves from the surrounding people chiefly because they did not do this sort of thing - sacrifice their children to their God. And yet poor Isaac, “the least of the patriarchs” is the most important of them to those of us whose faith heritage goes back to these three men and their families – though by way of another Jew who did the same thing, Jesus of Nazareth.

Much is made of the agony of Abraham in this story, as it should. Isaac was the “laughter” of his old age – in the Jewish tradition it was said Isaac was the only life left in his father’s old bones. Moreover...we believe God tempts no one to sin, our lesson from James (correctly) states that. God will not do to us that which cannot be done to God goes the reasoning. But there is no soft peddling the particulars of this story - God initiated a test...Abraham and Isaac were the objects of that test...God relented of what he’d asked of Abraham but the story also says that in the process he learned something about him – “*now I know...*” Is that what God wanted – to know something about Abraham – not take something from him? If so it’s chilling to think there may be things about us that God does not know – and might in some challenging way try to find out.

For us, we do well to remember that Abraham also tested God. God had promised him children, yet in Genesis 15 he tested God about that, saying “*O Lord...what can you give me since I remain childless and my servant Eliezar of Damascus will be my heir?*” More famously he questioned God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18, “*will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked. Far be that from you. Will not the judge of all the earth do what is just?*” Abraham wants to know... is God just and compassionate?

Testing seems to be a feature of their relationship – thus God, who should know but seems not to, can say *“Now I know that you (Abraham) fear God...”* So, when Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan, not far from Mount Moriah which now hosted the city of Jerusalem, a beloved Son is tested and the testing, Mark tells us plainly, is of God, by the Holy Spirit. Mark tells us that the Holy Spirit *“drove Jesus into the wilderness ...where he was tempted by Satan.”*

Was it so that God might learn something about his Son, his only Son, whom he loved...Jesus? Hebrews 5:8 seems to think so, saying *“Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”* Absolutely Jesus was tested in the city built on the hill where Abraham and Isaac were tested. Would he go to the cross – for other people’s sins? His testing in the wilderness, as described by Mark, supplies that answer.

No one else could identify with Isaac as Jesus could...and I perhaps now, no single figure of the church triumphant adores Jesus in quite the same way as Isaac does. So, what about us? Does God test us? We risk a dance on the head of a grammatical pin if we invoke Abraham and Isaac and say “yes” – God tests, while invoking James to say God does not tempt.

In his explanation of the Lord’s Prayer – the 6th Petition on temptation, Luther sides with James. *“God tempts no one to sin. But we ask in this petition that God would watch over us and keep us so that the devil, the world and our own sinful selves would not deceive us and lead us into false belief, despair, or other great and shameful sins. And we pray that even if we are so tempted, we may still win the final victory.”*

So, we pray, and much like Abraham ask some things of God - test God. *“Yes Lord, you know I am sorely tempted every day, often with the same things, and I have failed this tempting time and time again. So, I call upon you. Will you help me? Will you compassionate come to me will you deliver me as you delivered Isaac? Will you love me and forgive me and strengthen me for my tests against testers and tempters that will not let me be? When we pray like that in Jesus’ name, can we be anything but certain what he who did not withhold his son, his only son, whom he loved, will say? Is it not wonderful to know, the one whom God knows, loves him and us, like he does? AMEN*