

Standing on the Mountain

Third Sunday After Pentecost

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Text: Genesis 22:1-14

"What could God do to you that would destroy your faith?"

There was a point in my life where I had put so much energy, so much prayer, and so much hope into a relationship with my girlfriend Jen that I thought if it failed, maybe my faith would fail...

I was clinging to all the small meanings that had built us together, and had helped us previously overcome obstacles, dead spots, hurtful silences.

There was the time when she was considering breaking up with me, but the passage in church that morning spoke of "holding on, persevering, having faith..."--and she found peace again to continue dating me.

Then there was the time we had broken up, but had met to walk and talk on a Friday night. Our steps took us to a small convenience store where she remembered she needed to buy matches for something. Neither of us had our wallets, but when we emptied our pockets, together we had the exact amount we needed to pay for the box of matches - to the penny! Maybe it was a sign that together we still had enough to meet each other's needs--that there was still something there...something special...

I reasoned (somewhere in my psyche) "If God has come through in all these ways, surely he won't let this relationship die!"

What could God do that would destroy your faith?

What do you hold as a symbol of God's promise and blessing to you?

Where might you find yourself saying, "Not THAT God. Not THAT! Take something else, anything else, but please not that!"

"After these things," it says, "God tested Abraham."

I'm not sure I like this about God. That he tests Abraham.
The word "test" here is closely related to the word "tempt."
God **tempted** Abraham.

Tempt is usually a bad thing – something the devil does.

I can understand the association of "tempt" and "test" best when I think about training my dogs.

If I want Samson to learn to leave food alone unless I say he can have it, I will leave a tasty morsel in front of him and say "No... leave it!" After a pause, then, I will say, "OK, get it!"

If he responds favorably he will be rewarded. This is both a temptation and a test. I am tempting Sam with something he loves to see if he will wait for my guidance rather than go on impulse.

And the reason I do this is to build our relationship of trust so that we can share more. If I can trust Samson with a single morsel of food, he can learn to be trusted with a picnic.

I wonder if God tests Abraham like that... to see if he can be trusted with a greater promise of blessing.

But it still seems somewhat cruel. It was only 11 verses earlier that we heard last week's story, where Abraham sent away his other son, Ishmael, at God's command. And now God tells him this; and is unmercifully specific:

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love..."

Almost as if God is driving in a nail with each hammer stroke of his command--to make it perfectly clear who is meant, and what is being asked.

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love

"Yes, I mean your son Isaac, the promised one - and I know you love him."

...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."

It seems cruel. And unfair. Who would ask that of anyone? But that's not the center here...

What's at stake is not God's treatment of Abraham--whether or not it is cruel or fair--

What's at stake is the promise and the covenant. And whether or not Abraham has faith to let go of his son and trust God to take care of it.

One reason I don't like this whole testing is that if God tests Abraham like that, God might test us like that. God might test me like that... and that's ... disconcerting.

Would God really ask me to put the most important thing of my life on the line? The one thing, the only thing that I care about and that holds my future and security and promise of happiness? Would God really ask me to let go of that?

A relationship? A job or career? A house? A lifestyle? Kids or grandkids? An idea or hope? Could we let go of that thing enough to have it taken away?

And could I trust myself to know God's voice, so I'm not delusional?! So I don't do something crazy and then I get to the final judgment and God says, "What was that about? I never asked you to do THAT." Could I trust myself not to get all weird and confused in my own head?

I don't know. But I do take comfort in this story from the opening line – “After these things...”

After these things means there's a history. There's a relationship along the way, and Abraham knows God's voice when he hears it.

Chapter 12 - go from your home to land I will show you, and I will bless you - and he went

- and God appeared to Abram at an oak tree
- and God sent plagues on Pharaoh when he took Sarai as his wife, and protected the family
- God spoke to him and told him to settle in the land
- God promised him descendants as numerous as the stars, and he believed him
- The Lord appeared to Abram, and he fell flat on his face. (that seems a significant encounter) Made a covenant with him and changed his name
- The Lord appeared to Abraham as 3 visitors, and promised a son for he and Sarah in due season
- Abraham barter with The Lord for righteous lives
- Isaac is born...

The point is, it was "After these things..."

We each have our own life experiences God will lead us through to bring us to where we need to be --we have our own "after these things" before we are asked to stand on the mountain.

And when we stand on the mountain, we see. We see differently.

Abraham called that place, "The Lord will provide." Or (if you read the footnote) "The Lord will see." And so it is said that on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided, or he shall be seen.

Abraham comes to see that God sees -- that God will *see to it*. That everything will be taken care of. We can say that he believed God would be faithful, but now he comes to see it.

Sort of like believing the ice is safe. "Is the ice safe?" "yeah" "Okay, let's see." Only after you have walked across that ice can you say, "I now see that it is safe."

There are times when our beliefs have to be tested to CONFIRM them.

There are also times when they are tested to REFINE them. Or adjust them. That's also an aspect to seeing.

I remember a powerful scene from a film I watched years ago, where a young investigator psychologist is questioning a recluse anthropologist accused of murder. They are alone. The young psychiatrist is getting frustrated with the direction of the conversation and says, "I'm the one in control here!" Suddenly the murderer has the psychiatrist on the table in a suffocating headlock; he slaps some duct tape over his mouth and asks the investigator a question he must answer correctly to live. He has three tries. The question is this: "What did I take from you?"

The investigator writes on a pad of paper, "control" - wrong (he never had control) Next he writes "my freedom" - wrong (he was a fool to think he was ever truly free, controlled by the daily pettiness of life and ambition). One last chance, "what have you lost - what did I take from you?" the murderer asks. He writes, "my illusions." "Yeah, congratulations," says the anthropologist, as he rips off the tape and releases him, "You're a student after all -- and what have you lost? Your illusions, and little bit of skin..."

What do we have to lose with God?

Perhaps all we have to lose is our illusions.

C.S. Lewis went so far as to call God the "great iconoclast" - meaning that God continually shatters and re-shatters our ideas about himself and the way things are..."

"My idea of God is not a divine idea, he says in *A Grief Observed*. "It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it himself. He is the great iconoclast. Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of his presence? The Incarnation is the supreme example; it leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins."

He was getting at the fact that we are drawn to building illusions and then building our faith on those illusions - houses of cards, he called them. They must be

replaced -- no, destroyed -- because they are fragile and because they are not true-- and that means a hopeful future cannot be built on them.

Once again, “What could God do to you that would destroy your faith?”

If God is to lead us forward into an abundant space, a space of blessing like Abraham was promised, we have to let go of our illusions about who God is and what God will do. God will not let us rest on our laurels--God will not let us hold onto our illusions of what it means to be cared for by God. Instead, we must be in the place where God's presence is the very center of our being.

Hope Church, I invite you. I challenge you. I exhort you.

With the most sacred things in your life, with everything in your life, stand with Abraham on the Mount of the Lord, where God sees and provides.

Let me close using some words from Romans chapter 8:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen