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Sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
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I WANT US TO SPEND A FEW MINUTES this morning reflecting on this haunting story we have in our first reading. It's a story with mythological overtones deeply rooted in the history of our faith, maybe in the history of religion itself.

It's tempting to reject this story out of hand. After all, it makes most of us quite uncomfortable. We might even be repulsed by the God pictured at the beginning of the story, testing Abraham by asking him to ritually sacrifice his son Isaac.

Does the story nonetheless have something to say to us in 2006? The Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman believes it does, and some of what I have to say this morning is based on his observations. One thing I would add of my own is to remind us that, whether we emerge from some distant past, before stories were set down in writing, as Abraham does, or we spring full into life in 2006, we all live within our own mythologies, our own understandings of the world, of our relationships with the God, and of our relationships with each other. As Christians, we try to make our understandings increasingly match those of our Lord Jesus, who himself would have known and lived with—perhaps even struggled with—this story of Abraham, Isaac and God.

“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 . . . .” Let me remind us of the salient features of this story as we pick it up in progress: The Lord God has promised to bless Abraham with many descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham and his wife Sarah are old and they have no children, so they're not sure how this is going to happen. God takes care of that problem for them, and Isaac is born, making possible the promise of God.

So the command of God to Abraham in our reading must seem fairly bizarre to Abraham. Isaac is not only *his* and Sarah's son; just as critically, Isaac is the fulfillment and future of *God's* promise and desire for them, and for the world in which they live. This command of God can't make much sense to Abraham, although we don't see that in the story.

We don't experience Abraham struggle with what he hears from God. The story simply continues, "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out . . . to the place . . . that God had shown him."

It seems to me that in 2006 we need to be careful about how we read this story. There's enough crazy scriptural interpretation running around to fill many books. What bothers me at this point in the story is that Abraham doesn't talk with anybody else about what he's hearing from God.

Abraham doesn't practice basic principles of discernment regarding God's will for his life. Our discernment of what God *wants* is best made not just with ourselves listening to God in our rooms, but also then by going out and discussing what we hear with others. Abraham might still come to the same conclusion, that he was indeed hearing the voice of God, which in the world of the story he is; but we always need to check out those inner voices we hear with others in the community of faith before we act on them.

However, that caution comes more from 2006 than the world of our story, so let's return to it. The story's heart, its center, rests in the poignant interchange between Isaac and his father. Isaac says to Abraham, "Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

Everything in Abraham's life at this moment seems to be going against the will of God as he has known it. Have you ever been in that situation? If you have, you might have felt something of what I have felt, although we don't know how much Abraham feels it. I've

always found that when things are going contrary to what I expect of God, part of me wants to trust in God, and part of me wants nothing to do with God. And so we must choose which way we're ultimately going to go.

Maybe this is reading too much into the story, but I imagine there's a fair amount of churning going on inside of Abraham by this point. He doesn't understand what's happening, and God appears to be leading him in the opposite direction of what God has been up to so far in his life. On top of it all, the cost of following God's will seems way too high. Not only because of Abraham's love for Isaac, but also by the very fact that the cost God is asking Abraham to pay involves someone other than himself.

Abraham is held up to us as a paragon of faith by the tradition. I once heard Jesus himself described as either crazy - or truly who he says he is. In a similar way, Abraham is either crazy, or deeply a person of faith. Our religious tradition tells us that it's the second, and we hear that faith ring out in his response to Isaac's question about "where's the lamb, Dad?": "God will provide the lamb, son."

God will provide.

So well does Abraham know God, that in this horrific situation, he trusts that God *will* provide the lamb. He does not know how. He can't make *sense* of the situation. But his job in life, like our job in life, is far less to understand the ways of God and far more to trust that God is acting, whatever else might seem to be the case.

Throughout this story, Abraham seems to carry with him a deep sense of peace. Perhaps that peace comes from his deep trust in God's provision for his life that he carries along with just as he carries the firewood for the task God has called him to do. Ultimately the story is not just about Abraham's faithfulness in horrific situations, and our own faithfulness in equally horrific but different situations. Ultimately the story is about the faithfulness of God in those same situations.

Isaac, too, learns something about God's faithfulness in horrific situations, about God's deliverance in ways we do not always anticipate. I'm not sure how many *walks* he took with Abraham after this event! But he incorporates it into his life with God in a way that builds the relationship rather than one that whittles away at it.

Does God test us? This is not the only Biblical text that clearly says God *does* test us. And you might remember that Paul tells us that "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you might be able to endure it."

Whether or not we believe that God tests us, life itself certainly does test us. Life offers us plenty of opportunities to trust in God—or to trust in someone or something else. Of course that trust culminates in death itself, the big test that crosses every one of our paths. How we enter into the reality of death as part of life, whether or not we trust God in the midst of it, reveals a lot to us about where our faith is placed.

Most of us have considerable practice over the course of a lifetime, as we face big deaths and small ones, to again and again place our trust in the God who provides the lamb to save us, just as he provided the lamb that saved both Isaac and Abraham in quite different ways.

Sometimes we'll remember that lamb, we'll hear it bleating over in the thickets, getting our attention; at other times we'll miss it entirely, and the consequences will sometimes be disastrous.

But the lamb will always be there for us to turn to. For that promise of God, we can be eternally grateful.