



“A Troubled Trust”

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Genesis 22:1-14

Dr. Caleb Oladipo, a Nigerian-born Professor of Evangelism and Christian Missions at Campbell University, was one of the speakers at the CBF General Assembly in Atlanta this past week. During his presentation, he shared with us a story. He shared that as a child he had been a member of a club at his school. When it was time for all the students to buy the special club sweatshirt, he found he couldn't afford it. His family was so poor that he didn't have the two dollars needed to buy his own sweatshirt. He was heartbroken. But, even then, even before knowing God, he trusted that someone would somehow provide for his needs. On the day the sweatshirts were to be purchased by the students, Caleb's mother burst into his classroom. She was sweating and crying and panting. She collapsed onto her knees in front of her son and stretched out her hand, putting the two dollars she had collected for him into his palm. She had run six miles to get to her child and give him the money. Oladipo said, "Mom, you didn't have to run here for me!" And his mother, with foresight and strength responded, "I didn't just do it for you. I did it for your destiny."

My intention this summer is to continue to preach from the Old Testament lectionary texts, hoping to find insight and inspiration while examining the stories of ancient Hebrew women, men, and families. It has been difficult to find much redemption in the dysfunctional dynasty of Abraham. And today is no different. The text this morning is the binding of Isaac, the sacrifice of Abraham's son. And it is a dark and depressing text. As I read and researched, listened and learned, I decided that in a world where children are abused and trafficked and stories of victimized persons permeate the news, I just can't rehash this terrible tale. I know that many Christians respect this story of how Abraham followed God's order to commit filicide because he obeyed God's voice; I know that many faithful followers find hope in the ram that was provided; I know many of us make the leap to Jesus because God sacrificed God's son, just as Abraham did. But there's something more to this story, a deeper layer I'd like to explore.

I am intrigued by the troubled trust between God and Abraham because many of us have our own troubled trust with God. It seems that our lives reside in this uncomfortable tension between testing and providing. The Hebrew word for "provide" used in this text is "to see ahead." We often don't know what God is up to or if we can even trust God. In the midst of our struggles we pray that God sees ahead of us, knows our future, and discerns our destiny. We take comfort that God is not only with us in our trials, in our testing, and in our suffering, but God also sees ahead and knows how to provide for us.

And so, the 22nd chapter of Genesis is a place where we can go when we don't understand why God allows us to suffer and why God asks us to bear our heavy burdens. When we are in pain,

carrying a heavy load, feeling tested, the last thing we want is a reasonable explanation, because any reasonable explanation would be a charade and would minimize the anguish we feel. This story of God, Abraham, and Isaac is the place where we go when we are beyond hope, beyond anything we thought could or would happen, beyond what we imagined God would ever ask of us, when the most sensible thing to do might be to deny that God exists at all, or to deny that God cares at all, or to deny that God has any power at all. That would be sensible, except we just can't do it. We just can't do it because we are surrounded by people in our faith community who remind us that we need God. If we deny our relationship with God then we deny our own hearts and minds and souls.

So, we are stuck with the pain and incomprehension of this text. We are stuck with the troubling trust exhibited by Abraham, Isaac, and God. And the only way to move at all is to move toward this story, to move towards God, to move more deeply into this relationship that we call faith. That is what Abraham does. Without comprehension, nearly blinded by the horror of what he was told to do, Abraham followed God's lead, for the simple and satisfactory reason that it was God who was leading. To what end, Abraham had no idea. And often, neither do we.

But we don't indiscriminately follow an unknown God. That's called blind obedience. We, like Abraham, have learned to trust God because God has upheld us time and time again. We trust God because we have doubted and questioned and still felt God's leading. And we see in this text that Abraham trusted God even when what God asked of him seemed to run counter to everything God had promised. It was trust, not obedience, that bound Abraham to God, that binds us to God.

This trust is something identified by the 20th-century Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits, who was one of the leading thinkers in Jewish theology after the Holocaust. In his probing and gut-wrenching book "With God in Hell," Berkovits asked these questions: Why did so many Jews keep their faith in the ghettos and the Nazi death camps? Why did they gather to say prayers and keep Sabbath and circumcise their children as a sign of the covenant, even as the SS literally beat down the door? Why did they keep blessing God as the Holy One of Israel instead of cursing the God who seemed to have abandoned the Jews?

As he puzzled over these questions, Berkovits turned to this story of Abraham and Isaac. And what he discovered was the troubled trust that held Abraham together with God. Here is what Berkovits imagined Abraham said to God during those three days as he followed God to Moriah, the place of unspeakable sacrifice:

In this situation I do not understand you. Your behavior violates our covenant; still, I trust you because it is you, because it is you and me, because it is us.

... Almighty God! What You are asking of me is terrible.... But I have known You, my God. You have loved me and I love You. My God, You are breaking Your word to me.... Yet, I trust You; I trust You.

Well-known author and preacher, John Claypool, leaned into his trust in God when he went through the death of his daughter due to leukemia at eleven years-old. Claypool and his wife suffered through countless dark days of grief and loss. Many nights after his daughter's death Claypool had trouble sleeping. And so, one of the things he would do was go down to his study

and open up his Bible. One night he opened his Bible to Genesis 22 and read about another father and child going through the agony of death. In the midst of this troubling biblical story, Claypool went to his bookcase and pulled down a commentary by Gerhard von Rad, a German theologian. Von Rad said that we tend to try to treat life as our possession, that it is ours. And our children are our possession. And yet, life does not belong to us – it's God's. Life is a gift. Being born is a gift. Abraham needed clarity on that point: that life is a gift from God and it will all go back to God.

Claypool said that when he read that commentary, something in him began to change and a deep-seated resentment transformed into gratitude. And no longer was he mad at God for taking his daughter. He began to give thanks to God for at least giving him his daughter for as long as God had. From resentment to gratitude, it's the journey we all make, the journey of troubled trust. It is a journey in which we are trying to be faithful, trying to be faithful to all of the relationships and responsibilities in our lives while shouldering the burden of the bundle of sacrificial sticks for the altar. We walk by faith even though we are carrying our crosses.

Knowing at the end of the season of sacrifice there is salvation and at the end of the way of the cross there is resurrection helps us walk through this troubled text. It is the trust in resurrection that pushes us through this terrible story to a God who surprises us with life. Walter Brueggemann says that "Resurrection concerns the keeping of a promise when there is no ground for it. Faith is nothing other than trust in the power of the resurrection against every deathly circumstance. Abraham knows beyond understanding that God will find a way to bring life even in this scenario of death. That is the faith of Abraham. That is the faith of the listening community. And that is the meaning of the ram at the last moment. A substitute is not brought by Abraham but given by God in God's inscrutable graciousness."

This tension of testing and providing, of taking and giving, points us to Jesus who spoke of crucifixion and resurrection. Crucifixion and resurrection belong together and cannot be separated. The crucifixion of Jesus was the ultimate expression of the testing of God. Jesus trusted his father, he trusted the promise of God. Jesus trusted the providence of the resurrection in the midst of the testing of the crucifixion. Resurrection was the miracle by which God provided new life in a situation where the only thing anticipated was death.

We all know and understand that the troubled trust between testing and providing is the tension we, as the church, feel today between crucifixion and resurrection. We feel the load of the sticks upon our backs. We are trudging up the hills of our own lives, unsure about our future and our fate. We don't know whom we can trust or how things will turn out. But we follow Jesus by carrying our crosses knowing that testing and crucifixion and hurt and pain and grief and loss and confusion are all burdens we bear upon our backs that ultimately, through trust, lead us to resurrection, lead us to joy, lead us to relief, lead us to a redeeming God who has given us the gift of providential care since the beginning of time.

God is faithful. Even though we might have trouble trusting right now, God is faithful. Even though we might be falling under the weight of our load of sticks, God is faithful. Even though we might be looking for a miracle healing in the midst of illness, God is faithful. Even though we

might be screaming for justice in the midst of discrimination, God is faithful. Even though we might be facing our greatest test, crucified by worry and pain, remember that God is faithful.

We hold many troubled relationships and responsibilities. We are burdened by the weight of this world. We are often unsure what the future will bring. But in the midst of the testing and the crucified moments, we must remember to lean into our trust of God, no matter how troubling it might feel. For if we do, we will hear the voice of our providential parent, the One who sacrificed all for us saying, “I didn’t just do it for you. I did it for your destiny.”

Amen.