

Sermon – June 28, 2020  
“Here I Am”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Genesis 22:1-14

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen*

Good morning! Welcome to in-person worship, and for those joining on live stream, welcome and thanks for joining with us this morning or whenever you are watching. Thanks to everyone who is working to meet the requirements to help us safely conduct our worship services. I hope that you are also taking time to read “the rest of the story” each week as we journey along in the Old Testament.

I don't like tests and exams. When I was a new college student, one of my former employers gave me some advice for taking tests in college. He told me I was supposed to work to be so prepared for exams that I could confidently walk into the examination room and tell my professor, “I am ready, bring on your best, you cannot ask me a question that I don't know the answer to.” I recall vividly, early in my matriculation, learning that I was not that prepared. Many times, I have sat down for an exam, read the test questions, and wondered if I was in the wrong class. I can say with confidence that so far in my testing experience, I have never achieved this suggested level of preparedness.

In the same way that my academic testing experience broke the cycle of learning in comfort with an expectation of acquiring all the knowledge I needed, God's testing breaks into our comfortable living and brings new awareness of our true relationship with God. God's test questions are not about some mathematical method, but a testing of whether we will follow God's will or our own.

We need to strive to think of testing in the biblical sense as being tested by God. This type of test is an expression of love. To be tested by God should be seen as an honor, as God looking at us and seeking to see if our heart is truly bound to Him. Praise should be upon our lips when we are being tested. And, like my struggles to be prepared enough to be successful in

academic testing, we are, through testing, given a chance to grow in our understanding and experience of God. This is not an easy place to arrive in our relationship with God. Abraham does not arrive at this point without developing a deep knowledge of and faith in God, faith that prepares and sustains him through many tests.

Traditionally, Abraham is tested by God ten times. Nine of these tests are not stops on our journey, but they may be familiar to us. If we are reading all of Genesis, we will encounter them. They include God's call to Abram to leave his homeland and go to the land of Canaan; surviving the famine that occurs shortly after Abram's arrival in the Promised Land; the seizing of Abram's beloved wife Sarai in Egypt where she is taken to Pharaoh; the battle against the nine kings who captured Lot; Abraham's marriage to Hagar after Sarah is not able to conceive; God's instruction to Abraham to circumcise himself at an advanced age; the capture of Sarah by the king of Gerar; God's instruction to Abraham to send away Hagar; and Abraham's estrangement from his son Ishmael. In and through each of these tests, Abraham encounters God in new ways, and his faith grows and strengthens as he is stretched by the tests.

The tenth test, the one in our scripture today, is today's stop on our Old Testament journey. The first thing we should notice is that God calls Abraham by name. This points to God knowing us in detail, even our names. Yet while God knows us, he also calls us into testing. not because He needs to see us respond to His call, but to allow us to carry out what is on our hearts before Him. Notice Abraham's response to God's call. He says, "Here I am." The Hebrew word is *henane*. It's meaning goes far beyond the English translation of "here I am." This response from Abraham occurs throughout all of his testing, but occurs three times during this test: first, at the call of his name from God, second, when Isaac asks about the lamb for the sacrifice and finally, when the angel speaks Abraham's name on the mount of God. The Hebrew concept for this word is readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity and responsiveness to instructions. The song in our hymnal titled, "Here I am, Lord" captures the essence of the meaning of Abraham's response to God's call of his name. This call seems to be a vision, one that may occur in the night, and we see Abraham awake early in the morning and preparing to carry out God's command. How strange this command sounds, "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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you." Here is God, who will later clearly tell Israel that they shall not sacrifice their children to God as the other nations do to their gods, telling Abraham to take Isaac

and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. This command seems counter to our current understanding of God. Yet Abraham rises early in the morning, prepares, and leaves with Isaac; there is no delay in his obedience to carry out this command. The instructions for the burnt offering will be given later to Israel, but a burnt offering is the only one that requires sacrifice of the entire animal in the fire. A burnt offering is a complete or total sacrifice. There will be nothing left that is not given to God and consumed by the fire. Abraham's situation has become comfortable in God's covenant with the exit of Ishmael. That comfort is now threatened by God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham will be stretched by this command.

Look at the trip Abraham makes. It will take three days of walking to arrive at the place of sacrifice. Every step for the next three days is a reminder that he draws closer to his appointed task. This is not a command that he can hurriedly execute to get it over with. It is drawn out over three days of a journey with his son, whom he loves. Every step on this journey must be a submission to God by Abraham. Our tendency is to tell God, "No, we will not obey" when faced with a difficult test. Yet Abraham goes forward, step by step, faithfully responding to God.

The next focal point in the scripture comes as Abraham leaves the donkey and the young men who have traveled with them and goes on alone with Isaac. Don't miss in Abraham's statement as he leaves that he tells the young men, "We will worship and we will return." There is a growing statement in Abraham's faith emerging in his words. He may not know how God will work all of this out, but he at least speaks to the promise that it is through Isaac that God will bless the nations of the world.

Notice that Abraham takes the wood from the donkey and places it on Isaac's back. This parallels the actions he took in the earlier test when he sent his son Ishmael away and placed on his back bread and water. This action also connects us to the laying of the cross on Jesus' back for him to carry to his place of sacrifice. The connections between Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and God's sacrifice of his only son are powerful connections. The carrying of the wood also tells us that Isaac is large enough to carry the wood that a donkey has carried. He is no small child but is a young adult who could resist, toss aside the wood, and run. It is at this point that we receive some insight into why Isaac does not resist as Abraham carries out God's command. As Abraham and Isaac walk along, Isaac raises a question to his father. We hear Isaac call to Abraham with the word "Father" and Abraham answers with, *henane*, "Here I am." This is the second time that Abraham has responded with this term, this time not to God but to his son, his

only son whom he loves. Isaac is carrying the wood for the sacrifice, Abraham has the knife and fire, but Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Now most of my life when I have read this account, I have understood Abraham's response to this question to be a statement to his son of his faith that God will provide a lamb. And I have always wondered why Isaac does not seem to struggle with what is occurring. Isaac's question demonstrates full awareness of the need for a sacrifice. More recently, as I have studied this passage more, I am beginning to read Abraham's response differently. That difference is to put a slight pause in the response where the NRSV translators put a comma. Abraham's response to Isaac could be understood as him saying, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, *my son*." The idea being that the lamb God has provided is Isaac, Abraham's son. Abraham's statement to his son then becomes a statement that Isaac is the sacrifice that God has provided. If you take this approach to understanding this sentence, then the next statement by the narrator becomes a powerful statement of Isaac's response. The narrator says, "So the two of them walked on together." Read this way, this statement and all of the following actions of Isaac become ones of full cooperation with God. Isaac chooses upon hearing that he is to be the sacrifice to trust God and to cooperate with God's plan. Isaac does not throw down the wood and leave or struggle to escape, but walks on with his father. I hold this as a picture of cooperation with God and the command that has now been revealed to him by Abraham. They walk on together to the place of the sacrifice.

We should not miss the connection here to Jesus' willful submission to be the sacrifice that paid our sin debt to God. Jesus is the sacrifice that is found when no other sacrifice could be found that would pay our debt and enable our reconciliation to God. Jesus goes forward in the will of His Father in full submission to God's will to restore all of humanity to God.

They walk on until they arrive at the place God had shown to Abraham. There Abraham builds an altar, binds Isaac, and places him on the wood that he has positioned on the altar. We should recall that when Jesus is taken by the Jewish leaders in the Garden of Gethsemane that he also is bound and taken away and does not struggle or resist, even when he is beaten, flogged and then crucified. Jesus willingly bears our iniquities that we may be healed of our sin.

At this point Abraham sends his hand and takes the knife. We should be reminded of another hand that was sent, one we talked about a few weeks ago when Eve sent her hand and took the apple and ate and gave some to Adam who also ate. Here Abraham sends his hand and takes the knife and is prepared to deliver the death blow to sacrifice Isaac. It is at this point that

Abraham's name is called twice by a messenger from God, "Abraham, Abraham." And for the third time, Abraham responds with, "*henane*" or "Here I am." He stops his hand and is ready to carry out God's new command. There are only three times in the Bible that God or a messenger of God calls someone's name with a doubling of their name. Each time it is to stop the one addressed from doing something that would violate the divine. Here God calls to Abraham to stop him from killing Isaac. Later in our journey through the Old Testament, God will call to Moses in this manner to keep him from walking with his sandals on holy ground, and in the New Testament, Jesus will call Saul's name in this manner to keep him from killing Christians. God does not call out with this doubled call to anyone when Jesus is placed on the cross. There the sacrifice is allowed to be completed. The divine is allowed to be violated. God's son, His only son, whom he loves, dies on the cross to reconcile humanity to God.

As powerful as this image of the ending of the tenth test is, when Abraham's hand is stopped by the call from God, we need to also notice what God says following the calling of Abraham's name. God now tells Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Now we know from the reading that Abraham looks and sees a ram caught in the thicket by the horns, and he goes and takes the ram and sacrifices it in place of Isaac. God provides a substitute on His mount for Isaac. Later, on this same mount, on a cross, there will be no substitute for Jesus, God's son. No other suitable sacrifice will be found on the Mount of God, and Jesus will die for our sin that we might be reconciled to God, our sin debt paid in full, our fallen nature set aside, and our brokenness healed. A suitable sacrifice provided again by God.

I hope that you caught the words that God uses when Abraham passes this test. God does not say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant," but "Now I know that you fear God." God is looking at Abraham's heart and sees that it is ready to be sacrificed to God. Fear of God is not fear that makes us tremble, but a love of God that overshadows everything else and is then reflected in our lives as love of God and love of neighbor more than self. Will God test us in life? Yes, and when we are tested, we should pray that God will move us from our comfort zone through our time of testing that we might become those who fear God. Pray that we might be loved by God and allowed to enter into a time of testing, and that in our testing, we might also be willing to set aside that which God has given us that we might be those whom God recognizes as

those who fear Him. Our desire is to be those who love God more than self. When we pray about testing, we hope that we are such people who, when tested, will be found as those with a heart ready to be lifted up to God in sacrifice. We may not be those who are as faithful as Abraham, but we are those who believe in Jesus Christ and are being sanctified, refined by the Holy Spirit into a people whose hearts are becoming right with God. When God tests us, we become those whose eyes look up and see Christ our savior. We too are a people whose hearts are known to God, and he provides the sacrifice that is needed, Jesus Christ, who is always present with us.

*Pray with me: Father God, I confess that I do not desire to be tested, that I am comfortable with where I am in my walk with Jesus. Father, come and call my name and send me into a test that will allow me to encounter your transforming power through the love of Jesus Christ. Remake me, Lord, into the image of Christ. Call my name and give me a heart that replies, Here I am. Amen.*