

**“Too Much to Ask”**

Sermon preached at Church on the Hill  
Lenox, Massachusetts  
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The Rev. Dr. John A. Nelson

*Texts: Genesis 22:1-14*

- 1 Now after these events it was  
that God tested Avraham  
and said to him:  
Avraham!  
He said:  
Here I am.
- 2 [God] said:  
Pray take your son,  
your only-one,  
whom you love,  
Yitzhak,  
and go-you-forth to the land of Moriyya/Seeing,  
and offer him up there as an offering-up  
upon one of the mountains  
that I will tell you of.
- 3 Avraham started-early in the morning,  
he saddled his donkey,  
he took his two serving-lads with him and Yitzhak his son,  
he split wood for the offering-up  
and arose and went to the place that God had told him of.
- 4 On the third day Avraham lifted up his eyes  
and saw the place from afar.
- 5 Avraham said to his lads:  
You stay here with the donkey,  
and I and the lad wish to go yonder,  
we wish to bow down and then return to you.
- 6 Avraham took the wood for the offering-up,  
he placed them upon Yitzhak his son,  
in his hand he took the fire and the knife.  
Thus the two of them went together.
- 7 Yitzhak said to Avraham his father, he said:  
Father!  
He said:  
Here I am, my son.  
He said:  
Here are the fire and the wood,  
but where is the lamb for the offering-up?
- 8 Avraham said:  
God will see-for-[God’s-own-self] to the lamb for the offering-up,

my son.  
 Thus the two of them went together.  
 9 They came to the place that God had told him of;  
 there Avraham built the slaughter-site  
 and arranged the wood  
 and bound Yitzhak his son  
 and placed him on the slaughter-site atop the wood.  
 10 And Avraham stretched out his hand,  
 he took the knife to slay his son.  
 11 But Yhwh's messenger called to him from heaven  
 and said:  
 Avraham! Avraham!  
 He said:  
 Here I am.  
 12 [The voice] said:  
 Do not stretch out your hand against the lad,  
 do not do anything to him!  
 For now I know  
 that you are in awe of God—  
 you have not withheld your son, your only-one, from me.  
 13 Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw:  
 here, a ram was caught behind in the thicket by its horns!  
 Avraham went,  
 he took the ram  
 and offered it up as an offering-up in place of his son.  
 14 Avraham called the name of that place: Yhwh Sees.  
 As the saying is today: On Yhwh's mountain (it) is seen.<sup>1</sup>

## 1

Few stories test us the way this story tests us.

Some years ago the theatrical director Robert Wilson created a powerful, unsettling drama called *Deafman Glance*. In one mesmerizing, horrifying scene, an actress moving in the slowest of slow motion, takes up a knife, walks to a sitting child, slides the knife into his body, then cradles him as he falls to the floor. She repeats this with a second child. The slow motion means, in part, that there is no surprise. The audience knows, or strongly suspects, what is coming. The tension is terrible and terrifying.

God demands obedience. But is it too much to ask?

When I have studied this passage with others, the initial reactions are swift: How could Abraham do it? How could God? That is not a God I can believe in or an ancestor I could admire.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, The Schocken Bible, Vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books/Random House, 1995).

## 2

What do we do with the story? We could say, “This is the perfect example of why the Bible is not to be believed. It promotes brutality and child abuse.” We could say, “This is primitive. If God is revealed in relationship, I don’t want the relationship portrayed in that story.” We could reject the Bible, or reject this story.

But before we turn our back on the story, or before we tame its wildness, or push it outside and lock the door on its fearsomeness, consider some of the things that Jews and Christians have found in this terrifying text. It has disturbed and fascinated many generations of faithful people. What have they said about it?

- God is testing Abraham.
- Human sacrifice is rejected and replaced with animal sacrifice.
- God’s promise to Abraham was entirely God’s action — but now, the fulfillment of that promise includes Abraham’s obedience, raising him in importance and bringing him to the level of Moses.
- The story externalizes an internal struggle of Abraham, representing the conflict that every parent experiences at some level: love for a child, combined with awareness of the burden of the child; desire for the child to grow independent, combined with the unsettling sense that the child will grow apart from the parents; desire to teach the child, combined with the fear that the child will grow stronger and more capable than the parents.
- Obedience to God takes precedence over what human beings consider to be moral. In other words, it is more correct to obey God than to revere all life.
- The sacrifice of Isaac, in all its horror, hints at the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The story leaves room for many interpretations. After all of them, questions remain:

Is it too much to ask of Abraham, this unquestioning obedience?

Is it too much to ask of Isaac, this unknowing obedience?

Is it too much to ask of us, that we accept such a view of God and of humanity?

## 3

Actually, it is too much for us to ask of the Bible, in the words of another preacher, that it be a “manual for morality”? Sometimes the scripture gives clear direction: give food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, welcome to the marginalized. But most of the Bible is something other than an instruction book. The Bible doesn’t work that way.

It works another way.

It tells the story of every father who takes seriously God’s claim on his life, which will lead to frightfully difficult tensions between his loves in this world and his love of the Creator of heaven and earth.

It tells the story of every mother who, like the silent Sarah in this story, cannot protect her child from the world’s dangers.

It tells the story of every person who fears death, the utter end of self. It tells one story of part of ourselves — willing to justify acts of terror for the sake of a larger commitment.

When we read the Bible, we are not reading a description of things that happened — a history of the ancient days. We are reading about the way things are. We start out by reading the Bible, but we end up with the Bible reading us. In Shakespeare's words the Bible "holds, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature."

This story takes some of the fears that live inside you and me, and holds them up for us to see. Our fear of separation, of loss, of annihilation. Our fear of loss beyond control and beyond recovery. Our fear of the potential for violence that lives inside of us.

It's not unlike the monsters that Maurice Sendak created in *Where the Wild Things Are*: "I'll eat you up, I love you so." The story of Abraham and Isaac — which is also the story of Sarah, agonizingly absent, and the servants, helplessly sidelined — is the story of our fear of obedience to God, and it is the story of our own capacity to do harm, and ultimately it is the story of God's saving compassion.

The Bible reads us. In us it finds potential to do enormous harm. Just when we think we're aware of how much harm we can do, the Bible — or the newspaper — reads even greater potential for inhumanity among human beings.

#### 4

Few stories test us the way this one tests us.

Our encounter with God, who is the fullness of living, reveals our fear of death. Our encounter with God, source of all that is good, reveals that within us live impulses and capacities that for tremendous harm.

But the end of the story has the most amazing, astonishing truth.

At the beginning is God's demand for obedience, but at the end is God's insistence that mercy must be the answer.

God is the only one who made life, which means God is the only one with standing to take life, and God tempers faithfulness with mercy.

God's answer is mercy. No matter whether we are fearful of our own power over someone else or someone else's power over us: where there is mercy God will declare, "Here I am."

#### 5

And in case this is the first sermon you have ever heard, and in case it is the last: may mercy claim you.

May compassion seize your mind in the moment when you are about to utter a hard word.

May justice make a nest in your heart until you occupy the moral center of our world.

May forgiveness gather you up into the beloved community of grace.

May the Bible read you like a book, and declare: "See my beloved, with whom I am well pleased!"