

Reading the Bible can be a dangerous thing to do. Sometimes we stumble across a story that just doesn't make sense, that leaves us wondering how to interpret the passage. Have you ever encountered a passage that just doesn't feel right? Maybe you've encountered something in the Bible that leaves you hanging, wishing the ancient writers could tell you more about their lives. Sometimes the ancient world seems so unconnected to our lives that when we run into one of these difficult stories, we want to close our Bibles and say, "Maybe another day I will pick up where I left off, but today I have other things to do." We may forget about the Bible story for several days, but that nagging question "What did that mean?" lurks in the back of our minds. We want to avoid the question, but it keeps popping up, even when we try to ignore it.

That's what I experienced this week as I started several times to think about the story of Abraham and his journey up the hill with his son Isaac as they prepared for a sacrifice. The story begins pleasantly enough—father and son on a hike up the mountain

to worship God, but the narrator has tipped us off to a problem: God told Abraham to take his son as a burnt offering.

Why would God even suggest such a thing? Several times I tried to write this morning's sermon, but I found many distractions to avoid the story of Abraham. I'd look out the window. Pick up things off the floor. Listen to the birds singing. Get something to eat. Get something to drink. Go the bathroom. It's amazing how many things I can find to do when I want to avoid something.

Then I began to wonder why those who put together the suggested scriptures in the Narrative Lectionary included this story. Why even tell a story that suggests God would make such a request of a father to sacrifice his son? Can't we just dismiss this story as an ancient misunderstanding of who God is?

But then I realized the danger of avoiding such a story in the Bible—someone will eventually run across it and wonder what to do with it. Or even worse, some may use a part of the Bible to justify

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their hateful theological notions, such as several radio preachers who have interpreted the recent hurricanes as God's anger and wrath against certain types of people they don't like.<sup>1</sup>

No, we can't avoid this story in Genesis, for who knows what some might try to do with this story, how it might get twisted into a justification for abuse. Earlier in Genesis we learn that Abraham and his wife Sarah had waited for many years to have their son, Isaac. The narrator then tells us that "God tested Abraham," though we never hear God directly use this word. Is it possible that a test is not what God had in mind? Maybe the narrator misunderstood the situation. I struggle with the notion that God would send such a test into Abraham's life just to see if he could follow.

Now I know that life presents difficult challenges, for we've all had to endure struggles, and each one of us has faced a test at school or as part of a job interview, such as two young engineers who both

applied for a single position at a computer company. They both had the same qualifications. In order to determine which individual to hire, the department manager asked both applicants to take a test.

Upon completion of the test, both applicants had missed only one of the questions. The manager went to the first applicant and said, "Thank you for your interest, but we've decided to give the job to the other applicant."

"And why would you do that? We both got nine questions correct," argued the rejected applicant.

"We have based our decision not on the correct answers, but on the question you missed," said the department manager.

"And just how would one incorrect answer be better than the other?" the rejected applicant inquired.

"Simple," said the department manager. "Your fellow applicant put down on question

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number five, 'I don't know.' You put down, 'Neither do I.'"<sup>2</sup>

We've all faced difficult situations that challenge us, that stretch us in uncomfortable ways, and oftentimes we learn and grown from these experiences. We may even feel as though we're being tested, but I'm not sure God intentionally sets up challenges to see whether we are faithful.

If God didn't set up a test for Abraham, what else might be happening in this story? Some scholars suggest that Abraham was following the norms of his day, for other cultures nearby did practice child sacrifice. Maybe Abraham was following the light of their practices, doing what everyone else was doing. Have you ever been in a situation where the surrounding voices of society tempt you to do things differently than what you feel is right?

We may not agree with the idea that God sends difficult tests into our lives, but the surrounding culture tests us all the time. "Try it, you'll like it. Everyone else is doing it, so you should too. It's

only a little bit. No one will notice." On the days when we face these voices who try to convince us to follow their light, we may feel as though we're having a LightMare, a confusing set of messages in the middle of the day. Sort of like the confusing and scary images of a nightmare, but in the middle of the day as we struggle to discern what light to follow. Do I follow this light? Or that light? What should I do?

It could be that Abraham knew of the other practices of his day, experienced a LightMare and distraction on the way up the mountain. The narrator never hints of this dilemma, however, never acknowledges the inner struggle that Abraham may have faced. So we're still left wondering, *What do we do with this story?*

When I began looking at this story more closely, I noticed that six times the passage refers to a burnt offering, and twice the story refers to fire. It's almost as if the narrator is hinting that this story could burn us, that we need to be careful when playing with fire.

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Maybe this story is not so much a test of Abraham but a test of us, for Abraham makes it clear in the story that he trusts God. When he and his son go up into the mountain, Abraham tells those traveling with him, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Abraham knew they would come back. It’s the listeners of this story—you and me and generations of biblical readers—who wonder what might happen to Isaac.

When Isaac notices they did not bring along a lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham replied, “God will provide a lamb for a burnt offering.” Abraham knew what would happen, that God would provide a solution to the dilemma, but those of us listening to the story remain on edge, concerned about Isaac, not sure what will happen.

Maybe the story invites us to look at our own LightMares, our own situations where we wonder what God is doing. Abraham already knew what God was doing—God would provide. I wonder if this story has more to do with us as we struggle to interpret the story. It’s as though the narrator is asking us:

Do you see God as one who sets up tests to see if you will fail? Or do you see God as the one who provides for you when no other options seem clear?

I don’t think God creates LightMares that tempt us to travel down wrong pathways. Rather, I believe God provides for us when we’re lost, when we struggle. When we can’t seem to find our way, God offers us light. May you follow that light and discover the wonders that God does provide.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Hodgin, *1002 Humorous Illustrations*, #110.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/did-lesbians-cause-hurricanes-irma-and-harvey-god-knows/2017/09/08/638efbca-94bf-11e7-89fa-bb822a46da5b\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.a19772c375c4](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/did-lesbians-cause-hurricanes-irma-and-harvey-god-knows/2017/09/08/638efbca-94bf-11e7-89fa-bb822a46da5b_story.html?utm_term=.a19772c375c4)