

July 2, 2017: Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
 Genesis 22:1-18: Times of Testing

On this first Sunday of July, in the year 2017, the big news story everyone is talking about is the fact that the pastor of Brick Church has decided to grace the congregation with his presence. Apparently that is rare these days. You are welcome.

On the first Sunday of July, in the year 1924, people were talking about something else. It had to do with the summer Olympics, which were being held in the city of Paris. A prominent runner from Scotland, a man named Eric Liddell, was refusing to participate in a heat for the 100m race, on account of his religious convictions. Liddell was a devout Christian, and he felt that to compete on a Sunday would violate the commandment to honor the Sabbath. As a result of his decision, he was disqualified from that particular competition. But he would go on to win a gold medal in the 400m.

If you are worried that I told you that story in order to spend the next few minutes telling you it is sinful to play sports on Sunday, you can stop worrying. To stand up here and tell you that would make me quite a hypocrite. One of my favorite things to do on a Sunday afternoon is go fishing. And not with a bobber. I'm an active fisherman. That's probably why the fish can't catch me.

I told you that story to provide an example of someone who demonstrated their faith and devotion to God in a very powerful way. As I said before, Eric Liddell believed to compete on a Sunday went against the law of God. And he understood this moment as a test of his commitment to God. He had to decide if he was more devoted to God, or to the fame and recognition that would come from winning on the world's stage. His decision made it clear to the world where his allegiance was.

The story from Liddell's life is told in the well-known film, *Chariots of Fire*. But throughout his life, Eric Liddell faced many tests that would reveal his devotion to God. Before and after the Olympics, he served as a missionary to China. As the relationship between China and Japan worsened in the second half of World War II, he was warned many times to leave. He finally did send his wife and three daughters to safety in Canada, but he remained behind. Soon after they left he was sent to a Japanese internment camp where he later died at the age of 43. Many years later the Chinese government claimed he was given a chance to leave in a prisoner exchange, but insisted a pregnant woman be released in his place. That story has never been verified, but it does seem to be in keeping with his character.

If you have been a follower of Christ for any length of time you could probably testify to moments when your faith, your devotion, your commitment to God, etc. was tested. Who was responsible? It could be the devil. He tested Jesus in the wilderness. It could be the result of our own sinful desires. James would testify to that. It could just be life; we are faced with circumstances that force us to make a decision. The story of Abraham tells us it could even be God who is to blame.

Our passage began with a simple phrase, "After these things God tested Abraham." And what a test it was! I listened to Tim's sermon last week and heard him suggest that I had made up the date of my anniversary to avoid having to preach on that very difficult passage. I'm planning to send him a copy of my marriage license. Of course I'm not serious. I will admit, the text for last Sunday was difficult, but so is this one. In my opinion, this is one of the hardest stories in the Bible to understand, and certainly to preach on. It belongs in the category of things I wish were not in the Bible, but are all the same.

No matter how this story was written, we could imagine how difficult it would have been for Abraham, and Isaac, to do what God asked them to do. I can think of nothing worse than asking a father to

sacrifice his son. But the author goes out of their way to emphasize how much Abraham's son meant to him. God told Abraham to "take your son, your only son, the one you love, go to the land of Moriah and offer him one of the mountains as a burnt sacrifice."

And of course there is the larger context. Abraham was the man chosen by God to become the father of his chosen people. God extended the invitation to Abraham all the way back in chapter 12. There he made a promise to Abraham, that he would give him land of his own, descendants, and bless him and make him a blessing to the nations. At the time he had none of the above.

Now 40 years or more later, we find ourselves in Chapter 22. After walking with God all this time, he had experienced some blessing, but in terms of descendants, there was only one, Isaac. If you are familiar with his story you know he had another, Ishmael, the product of a relationship between him and his wife Sarah's servant girl Hagar. But after Isaac was born, Sarah demanded he permanently disown Hagar and Ishmael. Which he did. And now that he and Sarah were now both beyond the age of 100, it wasn't likely he would have more children. So Isaac was it. He was Abraham's only hope to receive the promises God had given him.

In a larger sense, the hope of the future nation of Israel, and even of the world was hanging on Isaac. And now God was telling Abraham to sacrifice him. It didn't make any sense. But he didn't even argue. He immediately set the wheels in motion. That is not to say that Abraham was not holding out hope that God would make other arrangements. We see this in his instructions to the two men who traveled with them, saying "Stay here...the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back." Then when Isaac asked his father where the lamb is that would be used in the sacrifice, he answered, "God himself will provide the lamb, my son."

But as we can see, he was willing to go through with it, and he almost would have if God had not intervened. He went so far as to bind his son, lay him on the altar, and raise the knife in the air, stopping only when the angel of the Lord cried out for him to do so.

We have many questions...and for many of them, the story does not seem to offer much of an answer. Questions like...

Why did God ask Abraham to do this thing?

Why was Abraham willing to do it?

As to why did God ask Abraham to do this thing? According to the Scripture, God needed to know if Abraham feared him. What I just said might have made you uncomfortable, for two reasons.

First, the idea that God did not know what Abraham would do. We believe that God is all-knowing, as did the ancient Israelites, but we have different ideas of what is knowable. Our minds, influenced more by Greek and Roman philosophy than the Bible, have been trained to think of the future as pre-determined and completely orchestrated by the gods, even down to the very last detail. But for the Jews, history was an unfolding story. God knew the beginning and the end, but everything in between had not yet been written. They believed the decisions God put before people were actually theirs to make. Abraham's decision would let God know if he was the one who would fulfill his plan to save the world. To do this he needed to fear God.

Second, this notion of fear. When we see this word our influence by sources other than the Bible continues to be evident. We think of a god like Zeus, far off in the heavens, waiting to strike us with a bolt of lightning when we make one mistake. Not long ago somebody came to the church who had not

been in some time, and they said jokingly, “Well, I haven’t been struck by lightning yet.” That’s not who God is. For the Jews, wrapped up in this idea of fear were things like awe and respect. God didn’t want Abraham to live in fear of him, but simply to recognize that he was God, and live accordingly. In this case, live in obedience. And because of the revelation of God in Jesus, we have a fuller picture of God than Abraham did. It’s easier for us to live in obedience because we know the love God has for us.

To this question as to why was Abraham was willing to do it? For Abraham, the idea of sacrificing your firstborn son to your God was not unheard of. He was living among the Canaanites at the time, and they believed the god who provided fertility...to animals, land, and people, was entitled to demand sacrifices of a portion of what had been produced. This included animals, grain, and even children. One lesson Abraham learned through this experience was that unlike other gods, his God was completely against human sacrifice.

But something else that factored in was the first-hand knowledge Abraham of what God was capable of. Over the course of their forty plus journey together, God had intervened in his life in so many ways. God had protected him from much stronger nations. God had blessed him with great prosperity. God had invited him into conversations with him about justice and morality. God had miraculously enabled Sarah to bear a son in her old age. After all this Abraham had come to believe that God was capable of things far beyond anything he could imagine. So even though he did not understand why God was telling him to sacrifice Isaac, he believed God would find another way to keep his promises.

What we really want to know this morning, is what does this mean for you and me?

What it does mean, is that our faith and commitment to God will be tested. The devil will test us. Our own sinful desires will test us. Life will test us. But sometimes the testing will come from God, usually in the form of a call to an act of radical obedience. He will convict us of something. Maybe through his Word, or through the Holy Spirit, or through a fellow Christian. When he does this He is testing us, to see where stand in relation to him.

For Eric Liddell, it was a call to put God before his Olympic aspirations. This doesn’t mean that every Olympic athlete that competes on a Sunday is not a Christian. But this was the decision God put before Eric. He chose to obey God.

I promised I wasn’t going to tell you that playing sports on Sunday was sinful, and I’m not. But making worshipping God on Sunday a priority would be a radical act of obedience in a society that treats Sunday just like any other day. Sports are one of the greatest offenders in this area. They are not the only thing. Work and hobbies are also big ones.

When my brother and I were small we played soccer on a county rec league. We received an invitation to try out for a travel team but when my parents realized the games would cause us to miss church, they told us we couldn’t do it. They were trying to teach us that worshipping God is a priority. It wasn’t just sports, when we were old enough to get jobs as teenagers, we understood that working on Sunday morning was not acceptable. Granted, we were not working to put food on the table or pay bills. I know sometimes we don’t have a choice. But we did have a choice. They made us choose to make church a priority.

It made us mad sometimes, but we got over it, even though their decision was the one thing that stood in the way of me becoming a professional soccer player. That is probably not true. But even if it were, it was still the right decision. My brother, sister and myself, as adults, all go to church and serve in

different kinds of ministries. I believe the lesson my parents tried to teach us plays a big part in that. I don't believe they would take credit, but I do think they could look at it as a blessing from God for their obedience.

Making worship a priority is only one area where God may call you to obedience. It might mean writing your tithe check first, instead of giving what's left over to God. It might mean taking a break from social media because of the way it causes your heart to wander from your spouse. It might mean quitting your job because it is putting you in compromising situations.

Why does God test us? It presents us with an opportunity for us to proclaim our trust in God, through our obedience to him. It provides an opportunity for God to reveal his faithfulness to us. Only in trusting completely do we receive the good gifts God wants to give us, because this is what God demands of us. This is how it works. We might not like it. It goes against everything we have been taught to believe about religion in our society, that we should approach religion casually, and not take it too seriously. But this story teaches us that faith is serious business and it has serious consequences.

The way God tests me may not be the same way he tests you. The call to obedience he issues to me, may not be the same call to obedience he issues to you. We are all at different points on the journey. It is so important that we don't impose our experiences on other believers. When someone starts telling us we need to do this, or we need to do that, we don't to listen, unless God is speaking to us through them. When God speaks to us, that's when we need to listen. That is when we need to obey. And we will be blessed because of it.

We can also learn that the testing doesn't come out of nowhere. The passage begins with three words, "After these things..." As I mentioned, that is a reference to the long history Abraham had with God. God's first conversation with Abraham was not, "Hey, I want you to sacrifice your son." It was, "Go." "Follow me to the life I will show you." When God tests us, it occurs in the context of our unfolding relationship with him. It takes into account our history with him. Scripture teaches us that he will not test us beyond what we can bear.

This doesn't mean faithfulness is easy, but it is possible. And we are not without help. His grace is constantly at work in our lives, and we have received the power of the Holy Spirit.