

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the perfect sacrifice, Jesus Christ our Savior and lord, amen.

When I talk to teachers, they almost always say they dislike the standardized tests that are mandated by the Federal Government. I've heard many times the lament that all they have time for is studying for the test. Yet, tests are an important part of learning. Children know when a test is coming. They prepare for it by reading their textbooks and going over their notes from class. When I was in school, I had very mixed feelings about taking tests. When I hadn't studied, I hated them, but when I felt well prepared, I actually likes them. During those times I felt like I was proving or showing my teacher just how much I had learned.

That's exactly what's happening in our story of the near sacrifice of Isaac from today's text. The writer of the story comes right out and tells us plainly that God was testing Abraham. This is the same man who was also called Abram and who was called by God to leave his homeland and his extended family to go to a land that God said he would show him. The amazing thing about Abram was that he did as God asked and packed up his camels and his immediate family and left the land of Ur for a destination unknown, at least it was unknown to Abram.

Along the journey Abram's trust in God waivered and he presented his wife, Sarai as his sister in order to avoid being killed by some hormone crazed Egyptians.

Apparently, Sarai was very beautiful... Anyway, this is the same Abraham who

laughed when the Angel of God announced he and Sarai would have a child in their old age. While waiting for this promised offspring, once again Abram's faith faltered and he fathered a child with Sarai's handmaid, Hagar. That child was named Ishmael and went on to be the Father of the Islamic Faith. So, in at least two well known examples, Abraham's faith or trust in God had failed spectacularly.

As our text says, "After all these things..." we come to the present text before us today, where we find Abraham once again facing God's testing of his faith. That's what this whole story is about. Yes, the test could have ended in an extremely gruesome way if Abraham had carried out the original command of God, but he knew all along God would somehow, somehow, still be true to his promise. This time there's no doubt about Abraham's trust in God. We don't have to speculate; the clues are right there in the text itself. After packing up the donkey, taking two of his best servants, and of course Isaac as well, they departed early in the morning on their three-day journey. Once Abraham sees the place God identified as the place for the sacrifice, he tells the servants to stay with the donkey while he and Isaac go on ahead to worship. The exact words recorded from Abraham are: "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Did you notice Abraham said **we will return?** He seemed pretty sure that either God would stop him from making

Isaac the sacrifice or that if he did indeed kill Isaac, that God would bring him back to life. One option I'm certain Abraham rejected was that God would allow Abraham to carry out the sacrifice and Isaac would be lost forever. God's promise had been so emphatic. Abraham's legacy would begin and go through Isaac and not any other offspring. So, Abraham trusted God to provide. That's exactly what happened. God did provide. At the last possible moment God intervened and provided the perfect Ram for the sacrifice of worship.

Abraham passed the testing of his faith in God! I'm not certain I would have passed that test. I mean sacrificing my only son just to show God how much I love Him... My family means everything to me, and I would no more think about killing any one of them than I would contemplate killing myself. It would be unthinkable! Yet that's exactly what God required of Abraham. Jesus put it another way when He was walking around the towns and countryside's of Judea and the Galilee. I hear the words of Jesus, "WHOEVER LOVES FATHER OR MOTHER, WHOEVER LOVES SON OR DAUGHTER MORE THAN ME IS NOT WORTHY OF ME" (Mt. 10:37), and I stumble. We're so trained to do everything for our kids. We provide for them. We direct and guide them. We save for them. We protect them. We enjoy them. We sign them up for sports teams and other activities. We help them get their first job. Isn't that what parents are supposed to do? Yes, but Abraham's test still tests us too. We have all said on

occasion, “God is important to me,” but here we are confronted with the truth that God doesn’t want to be just “important”; God wants to be most important – more important than job, more important than school, more important than boyfriend or girlfriend, more important than spouse, more important than even the little bundles of joy we bring home from the hospital. We are each tested to see if we can even keep the First Commandment. The bad news is we all fail that test, miserably...

How could Abraham do it? Where did he get this DEEP TRUST in God? Only in one way; by walking closely with the Lord and clinging in faith to, and trusting in, God’s promises. God had trained Abraham to trust his Word, and so deep was his trust that in the book of Hebrews the Holy Spirit tells us that Abraham was going to slay his son, fully believing that God was simply going to raise his son back to life (Heb. 11:17-19). In the end, there was no need to kill Isaac. In God’s eyes the sacrifice had been made. As dear as Isaac was, in Abraham’s heart the LORD was his treasure, and exceeding great reward (Gen. 15:1).

God may well, in his infinite wisdom, come and test some of you, my dear church family. In fact, some of you are undergoing tests of faith even as we speak. I’m certain God isn’t asking anyone today to literally kill their only child, but we all undergo testing of our faith in God in many other ways. Will you stand? Will you walk with humble yet strong faith in your God as did Abraham? Or will you

toss in the towel, angry at God and complaining, “This is too hard!” I pray it’s the first choice, because that’s the path of blessing. To walk the path of Abraham you first have to know God through his Word, Jesus Christ. God doesn’t call us to merely have an intellectual relationship with him, but rather, into a deep personal trusting and loving relationship. So, walk with him closely – daily, not occasionally. Come to his HOLY MOUNTAIN, that is, come to his Church to be strengthened with Word and Sacrament. And as you do, it will be provided – a deeper trust that can stand when the day of testing comes. Once again, I’m reminded of the words of Jesus who said, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matt. 6:33 NRS)”

God will provide. That’s the really good news for today. God will provide the faith and the trust, but it comes through testing. The more your faith is tested the stronger it gets. It’s sort of like doing sit ups. When you first start out doing sit ups your abs hurt. It’s pretty painful to move for a couple of days, but if you keep at it, pretty soon those muscles start to get stronger. Before you know it, your able to do 50 or 100 sit ups without much pain. Our faith works sort of like that. The more it gets tested the more it hurts, but the more it grows stronger, until the day comes when trouble hits and you brush it aside because you know God will provide.

All those earlier stories about Abram in the book of Genesis show us the many times when his faith was tested and he showed glimmers of true faith, but he still failed. In all those previous tests Abraham learned to trust God and God's promises. When I missed some questions on tests in school, I didn't throw in the towel and quit. I learned from my mistakes and tried harder the next time. That's what we're called to do when God tests our faith. When we fall or fail, know you are already forgiven, get up and try again. In the testing you're growing and learning that God can in fact be trusted and God will in fact provide everything you need for today.

May God's testing of your faith make you stronger in your faith and in trusting God for everything. May we place God as the number one thing in our lives so that we do in fact seek first His Kingdom here on earth before and above all things. May God bless our failed attempts with second chances and forgiveness and with his biggest surprise of all, Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son whom God did not withhold, but offered Him up as our perfect sacrifice for all that we are unable to accomplish. Thanks be to God for our Savior, Jesus Christ and to Him be Glory and Praise now and forever. AMEN!