



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

At the Edge of Providence  
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

June 29, 2008  
*Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)*  
Genesis 22:1-14

Not too many months ago I was talking with some parents whose child had been given a Bible by this congregation when he completed the second grade. As you may remember, we give those who are moving into the third grade a Bible as a sign of their graduating from Children's Church.

It seems that the child would often read his Bible before going to bed at night, which, of course, is something to be encouraged. But, and here's where it gets a bit dangerous, unless you block out portions of the Bible not suitable for late-night reading by elementary-age children, you will find yourself in the same boat those parents did. It seems that the child in question had chosen to read the story of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that story prompted a host of questions from their son.

Whenever I've told that story to other parents when their child has been given a Bible, I usually tell them that I've marked some stories that they should be sure to read late at night, and to ask their parents if they have any questions about what they read.

Obviously, this story from Genesis 22 would be one of those stories that might disturb the sleep of even the bravest soon-to-be third grader. There's little doubt why this story isn't included among the foundational stories of the faith that we identified when setting up our Faith Village rotation. It's a terribly disturbing story to children and adults alike, and it's going to take some courage—and some thought—to hear what God wants us to hear today.

One of my friends, Mike Krech, also a pastor, tells of a time he went to visit a man in the hospital. He had been injured in a pretty serious car accident. Mike describes it this way: "As he lay in the hospital bed, with bandages here, there, and everywhere, deep bruises evident and no small amount of pain and rehabilitation in his future, he said, "Someone told me this was a test from God. If it is, next time, I'd prefer a written test."

I suspect that most of us have heard a number of people in their time of physical illness or personal crisis say that they wondered if it were a test from God. I suppose a preacher should never want to remove God from any equation of life, but I sometimes resist the idea that our adversities are God's tests. Why would a holy and loving God put us to the test?

And yet, here in Genesis 22, one of the most challenging chapters in all of scripture, the stage for these unfathomable events is set with the words: "After these things God *tested* Abraham." God called to Abraham and told him to go and sacrifice his son Isaac, or as the text poignantly puts it: "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..."

Some of you may remember back to 1999, which was often talked about as "the year of the Bible." Christians of all stripes were committing themselves to reading the

whole Bible in that calendar year. The church where I was pastor participated in one of the larger programs sponsored by our denomination. It was called “The Year of the Bible.” And so, as January dawned, a number of members of that congregation plunged into the assigned readings, which began with the opening chapters of Genesis.

It wasn’t hard to tell the ones who were engaged in the process. Each week, especially at the beginning of the prescribed readings from Genesis, at least one of those participants would exclaim: “I can’t believe how our ancestors acted. How did they ever make the Bible?”

Or, “The people who keep pointing to the Bible and talking about family values obviously never read these stories!”

Or, perhaps my favorite: “I’m sure glad I named my child after the biblical character I did, because he’s the only one who didn’t get drunk, kill somebody, or do any of the other horrible things the other names I considered did.”

And then came chapter 22 of Genesis, a chapter which contains a story that shocks the sensibilities of even the most hardened biblical scholars. What are we to make of the story of God testing Abraham with these words: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and kill him off?” What are we to make of such a difficult story?

One thing’s for sure: Isaac’s not simply a child in the story. Nor is he just a sacrifice. He is hope embodied. You remember Abraham and Sarah’s story.

Ten chapters ago, in Genesis 12, God calls to Abraham and Sarah and tells them to leave the land and go to the place that God would show them. So they pack up and hit the road.

God also promised land and a child. On the basis of God’s promise, Abraham and Sarah set out on a journey filled with difficulties. Several chapters later, God speaks to Abraham again: “Abraham, I am your shield; your reward will be very great.”

But Abraham dismisses it by saying, “Yeah. I’ve heard that from you before, God. But still I have no land and no heir.”

It’s then that God takes Abraham outside and points to the skies: “Count the stars, Abraham, if you’re able to number them. So shall your descendants be. And you will be a blessing to all the world.”

And Abraham trusted the promise.

Finally, when Abraham is 99 years old, he and Sarah get the news from the strangers: “By this time next year, Sarah will have given birth to a son.”

And they laughed. How absurd to think that at their age they would be dipping into their retirement savings for a nursery, as Frederick Buechner suggests.

But it happens. Isaac, the hope of the promise is born. God has given the gift of a child who was much more than a child—he is the very embodiment of hope for Abraham and Sarah. All that they had was somehow connected to his life.

And now, God commands the unthinkable: “Take your son and kill him.”

Unbelievably, Abraham obeys. The story leaves so many things to our imagination: What did Sarah think of Abraham’s intentions? Was Isaac aware of what was happening before he asked his question? Did Sarah try to stop the trip?

All of these questions and more swirl around this horrible story. It seems almost

unreal that God, who had asked Abraham to forsake his past when he was called to leave his home and family, would now ask Abraham to cut off his future.

And, unbelievably, Abraham obeys. But just as Abraham raises the knife to kill, just as we avert our eyes to the horror being played out, God acts. And from heaven the voice proclaims: “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.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Abraham has passed the test. What God did not know, God now knows: Abraham loves the gift Isaac to be sure; but Abraham loves the Giver more.

Let’s be honest: It’s a terrible, shocking story. And, as my best friend Chris reminded me by way of something he once wrote, it’s a story that still shakes us to the core, because our God is still calling.

Chris wrote about the time several years ago when his wife and son were signed up to go to Mexico on a youth mission trip. Not long before they were to go depart, Chris received an e-mail from the pastor of another congregation telling him that the State Department put out a travel advisory about recent violence along the border with Mexico. Here’s how Chris describes it:

“I forwarded this email to Ryan, our Youth Director and asked him if this was something about which we should be concerned. He wrote back, saying, in essence, maybe. He sought to get more information, but he felt strongly that the trip should still happen.

I put up a good, faithful front. After all, I am a pastor, I know what I should think and feel. But, if I’m to be honest, inside I secretly wanted to take my son, my only son, whom I love, and my wife, and lock them in their bedrooms in order to keep them from going on this trip. I’m not Abraham, after all. He can trudge up the mountain all he likes. Everything I got’s in my family, and I won’t trudge so easily.

Ryan got back with me and let me know that, yes, there was information that the State Department had out there, that the activity was along the border, that the bus would be moving through the border quickly and the danger was minimal, but of course, no one can guarantee anything. So, we decided that we would inform the parents of the State Department bulletin and have each one decide and, if they still wanted their children to go, to sign and notarize a statement that says they were informed of the bulletin.

It was quite a sight; I have to tell you, to see 100% of the parents line up to sign these forms, without any visible hesitation. I was inspired by their faith. But I waited until the last minute. Kim kept reminding me that I needed to sign the form. It sat there, looking for all the world like Mount Moriah. I picked up my knife, I mean my pen, and signed, with a silent prayer that God would provide. Well it was more like a demand that God *better* provide. In the end, it’s the only prayer any of us can make, come what may.”

Chris summed it up this way: “I finally decided that, you know, we sacrifice our children daily to far lesser gods than this one. Why not send them to Mexico to do justice, to sacrifice themselves to this God who is faithful and true and *will* provide, come what may.”

There is no way to neaten up this story, to smooth over its rough edges. All we can do is stand there on Moriah, right at the edge of God's providence, and consider the question of whether we trust the One who gives more than the gifts that are given. And, whether we like it or not, that question will circle through our minds time after time after time because the God who claims us in the waters of baptism will never stop asking us to forsake everything else to trust in him.