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The National Presbyterian Church

## **Abraham: Sorting Out Our Deepest Hopes**

Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 11:17-19, Genesis 22

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons through the month of August we are looking together at the story of one of the great figures in the pages of the Bible and in world history, a man by the name of Abraham; a man who lived one-and-a-half to two thousand years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who has probably had a greater impact on the lives of individual people throughout history than just about anybody else – because he is the literal and the spiritual ancestor not only of the Jewish people but of the followers of Mohammed, the Islamic people, and the of our own Jesus Christ, Christian people, as well. Abraham is the towering figure who stands in the background of these three great monotheistic religions which to this day have billions of adherents (in fact, estimates indicate almost 4 billion!).

In the story of Abraham, as we've looked at it so far and we find his story in the first book in the Bible, in the book of Genesis, chapters 11-25) we've seen that Abraham has been on a journey. And it's the theme of "journey" which characterizes the story of Abraham. To begin with the journey is quite literal and geographic: Abraham moves! He moves from a city called Ur (which was in what would now be Iraq). He moves up north (to what is modern day Syria on the border with Turkey). He then moves south (down through modern day Lebanon and Israel) all the way to Egypt. And then he moves back north again and settles in two or three different places (so he's never quite settled!): one place is near Bethel (just north of modern day Ramallah in the West Bank); another is Hebron (to this day a West Bank city); and then in Beersheba (which is in Israel, further south, close to the desert).

So the story of Abraham is a geographic story; it's a literal story of a person on the move. But the story of Abraham is not just a "National Geographic special"! That's not the point of it. What's going on in the midst of this geographical moving (and this so often happens when we literally move), is a spiritual journey as well. And Abraham is on this spiritual journey. He is on a kind of pilgrimage, in which he learns not just about God's world, and not just about his own life (who he is), but learns, especially, about God. He learns about God: who God is, who *his* God is, the God who somehow has gripped his life. And that God is our God: the God of Abraham is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ – so much of what we know about God, what we have come to believe and take for granted about God, Abraham learned through the experiences of his journey recorded in the book of Genesis.

- He learned for example that *God is a God who speaks*. God is a God who speaks. We may say "Well there's nothing new in that!" But I tend to think that we take this truth for granted when we shouldn't. let me put it like this: Why should the God who created the universe be

bothered to speak to ordinary people like you and me? How in the world does God have time for that? But the God whom Abraham comes to know, the God of the universe, speaks! And speaks to ordinary people like Abraham.

- And then *this God calls*: calls ordinary people into his service. Not just into the ministry. Let's be clear: Abraham was never called into the ministry, but was emphatically called into God's service. And one of the great truths that arose in the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s' and 1600s is the truth that God calls ordinary people to think of their daily labor not just as a job, but as a calling – a “vocation,” a calling from God. God calls ordinary people so that our work becomes meaningful.
- He also *directs* and he *guides*.
- And Abraham discovers as well that this God *makes promises*. Surely we should all find this stunning? That almighty God, the God of the quirks and quarks and this vast universe, humbles himself to commit himself, to bind himself by promise, to people like you and me and like Abraham. God makes these remarkable promises to Abraham, saying (Genesis 12, 13, 15, and 17), “*I'm going to give you descendants, more than the dust of the Earth and the stars of the sky and from you nations will come.*” God binds himself in promise to Abraham and he says to him “*I'm going to give you this land.*” And through Jesus Christ he keeps on making promises to people like you and me. Promises to love us, to never fail us or forsake us; to give us an eternal home that begins right here and now. Maybe not physical land but a home, a place in which we can dwell and lives that are filled with meaning and purpose.

So this God of Abraham is our God too; a God who makes promises and keep them. *He is also as Abraham discovered a judge*: a judge who holds people to account.

Sometimes we don't like the idea of judgment and wish that such an idea wasn't part of the scripture, but it is. And we cannot escape it. God is a judge and this should be seen not as negative but as positive. It is part of our glory that God is a judge. That is, if we were merely animals God would not have any need to judge us. If we were puppets on a string God would have no need to judge us. If we were robots God would not have to judge us. But because we are *made in the image of God as accountable human beings*, because we are of value, God holds us to account. If you are in any business judgment day inevitably comes, first when your product goes on the market: what will people think? How will they judge my product? And while that day is scary, it is also important and critical and vital and wonderful – that moment of accountability when you're on show and what you do matters. So our lives matter, your life matters, my life matters.

God is a judge who will judge rightly and justly and fairly and Abraham discovers that he can actually enter into prayer (in the form of an argument!!) with God, to seek to ensure that *when* God judges it will be just – perfectly just. So we find him in Genesis 18 wrestling with God and in effect saying, “I don't like the idea of judgment but if you are going to judge then make sure that no judgment is ever unfair.” And God makes a remarkable commitment (Gen.18:26). He's about to judge the city of Sodom and he says *if I find in Sodom 50, just 50, righteous people*

*I'll forgive the lot. I'll forgive the lot.* This judge is filled with mercy. He will forgive the lot for 50 righteous ones; and what we know, of course, as Christians, is that because of just one righteous person, Jesus Christ, all of us find mercy. We find mercy in this one righteous person Jesus Christ, not because we are righteous but because he is righteous. Abraham's God is our God and he is a judge.

And Abraham begins to place his faith in this God. He begins to trust this God. He begins to follow this God. He allows this God to change the direction of his life geographically, quite literally, and spiritually, to change the course and the direction of his life. And this is critical for us to see, because sometimes some people have that kind of faith where they are going their own way – “*this is my life. This is my direction and course – God, will you come and join me?*” – when that's precisely not how it was with Abraham! No! With Abraham, it's God who speaks first, and puts us on the spot, saying, “*I'm going this way, will you join me?*” And that is quite different, substantially different: when God sets the direction and says “Follow me!” is it not the same voice as the voice of Jesus which says repeatedly in the gospels, “Follow me”? You follow me?

So this is the God of Abraham in whom he places his trust. Sometimes his trust is great, his faith is great. But not always. And part of that “not always” is really one of the wonderful things in scripture: the saints in the pages of scripture (and Abraham is surely one of those saints whom we lift up) always seem to be flawed. They are never plastic; they are never perfect (except for Jesus!); they are flawed! and Abraham's flaws are described for us in scripture.

There is a time when he does not trust God. He has no faith in God when he is scared. When strong leaders have an interest in his wife he says to them “she's not my wife; she's just my sister!” (Try that out at home, and see what happens!) But Abraham gets scared of other people. He is not this perfect person, but he becomes afraid, and he loses his faith and trust in God and the scripture tells us those stories.

And then there's one occasion in which both Abraham and his wife Sarah both together lose their trust in God's promise to give them descendants, and they think that God will give descendants through a way of manipulating God's will. And so Abraham has a child by Sarah's consent, through her maid Hagar. And they say “Well, God is going to fulfill his promise to give us descendants in this way.” And God says no that's not the case. “I have promised you repeatedly again and again and again that the two of you will bear fruit. You will have a child and through that child your descendants will come.” But they're getting old. And it's become physically impossible that they can procreate. And they lose faith in God. They lose their trust in God. And they laugh at God (the laugh of unbelief: 17:17, 18:12).

But what we discover now is that God is patient with them. This God who is a judge is patient with them, and does not throw them out because of their faithlessness, but holds on to them – and has the last laugh when, in God's time, not their time, when it's impossible for them to have children but still possible for God (18:14: Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?), God gives them a child. Isaac their son is born through whom their descendants will come, and be as

many as the dust of the Earth (13:16) and the stars of the sky (15:5) and through whom a multitude of nations will come (17:6).

This descendant comes, and God keeps his promise, and Abraham and Sarah begin to see with their own eyes as they have never seen before that the promise-making God is a promise-keeping God: a God who is exceedingly patient with them as they struggle with their faith. But the journey keeps on going. It never stops. And that's true for you and me as well: our journey keeps on going and never stops (this side of heaven!). And while Abraham and Sarah may be tempted to stop at the place where they say "Oh, God is so patient with our lack of faith, because God is so faithful, God won't let them! Instead, God leads them on and, in effect, says

*"Wait a minute, yes, I am patient, but I have no intention of leaving you in your wavering faith, in your weakness, but I will keep working in your life until that small faith (Jesus calls it faith the size of a grain of mustard seed) grows and becomes strong; until your life is filled with a faith which is placed solidly on my life and my promises."*

It may seem to be a trite saying, but it's true: God loves us (and he loved Abraham) just as we are. But he loves us too much to leave us as we are. That is, God meets us where we are, but he is always moving us on toward holiness and faith: – God had no intention of leaving Abraham with this weak, vacillating faith, but was intent on doing everything possible to build up his faith and strength; to show Abraham who he was and where God wanted him to be – and then to lead him to that place.

And so, as the story progresses (as we shall find in a moment when we read Genesis 22), God devises a means of fulfilling this purpose: God devises a test, a fiery ordeal for Abraham; a test in which his deepest hopes are revealed, his deepest trust is revealed, and through which he will begin to grow stronger in the faith that has begun: as all of us know, iron only becomes steel when it passes through the fire.

*The God of Abraham is the God who speaks and who calls and who directs and who promises and who keeps his promises and who judges and who is patient but he is Abraham also discovers a God who tests. A God who tests every one of his servants.*

This in fact is a portrait of God that we see repeated throughout scripture, from the time of Abraham on. We certainly see it so graphically in the story of Abraham, but we see it in other places in scripture as well: God tests the servants he loves!

- God tested his son, Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry. God sent him out into the desert, into the wilderness. The Scripture says (Matthew 4) that the Spirit "drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted or tested by the devil." [DR: The words "tempt" and "test" in New Testament Greek translate the same word: *peirasmōs*]. Jesus was tested by God there in the wilderness. The primary question that he had to face had to do with his identity as God's divine son. So the devil says slyly and repeatedly, "*If you are the son of God . . .*" . . . "If you are the son of God . . . if you really think that you're on God's mission then do this or that to

prove it! And so Jesus is tested to see whether he will hold true to the calling that God has given to him.

- Jesus' testing continues at the end of his ministry, as well, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus is about to be crucified. And this time it's the humanity of Jesus which comes into view rather than his divinity. It's the pain of suffering that he doesn't want to face. So there in the Garden of Gethsemane he is agony as he prays for his father to lead him on a painless path: "if you can remove this Lord, remove it. I don't want it!" And we are watching the drama: Will he go to the cross for your sake and mine? Will he die for our sins or not? Or will he avoid the cross and leave us in our sins? And . . . fortunately for us, he meets the test!
- And Jesus, in his own ministry treats others in this same way: he tests them to see if they will be faithful; which is why we read the story in Mark 10 about the rich ruler who comes up to Jesus and asks about eternal life. And Jesus says, "What about the Commandments? Have you kept them?" And the man replies that of course he's kept them. But, what Jesus can see in his heart is that there's one that he hasn't kept. He doesn't really love, trust or put God first (the first commandment). He trusts in himself and his own righteousness. So Jesus says to him, "Give away everything that you have!) And you remember the story: the man doesn't meet the test. Doesn't meet the test. He goes away sorrowful.
- Now this is not a test, by the way, that God gives to everybody in the same way. We are all going to be tested by how we use our money, but not all are going to be asked to give it all away. In fact, Garrison Keeler, in his inimitable way, says that if we did that, then the poor would become rich, and we would become poor, and so the poor would then have to give their new found money back to us!! and on and on and on! So we can't all do that. Nor does Jesus expect us to: but . . . living by the truth that whether we keep it or not, nothing of what we have is really ours; it's all God's . . . well, for some of us, that's a real test! And perhaps we can meet the test by giving away a small portion, a tithe of what God has given to us? Can we do that, and pass that test? -- a much smaller test than his? And that's the point: each one of us will be tested in different ways, but just as Jesus put this man to the test, all Christians, and especially the early Christians, understood that this testing of faith was *par for the course*. Testing was part and parcel of being a follower of Christ. Faith was always going to be tested.
- And when the first followers of Jesus faced persecution in the early days of the Christian church they saw it in this light too: as a test! Not as a failure of God to love and protect them, but a test from God. And in our prayers today we're praying for Christians in the Middle East, whether in Iraq or Syria or Palestine or Egypt who are facing tests which sometimes are indescribable or unthinkable; yet they come to his own people from a loving and gracious God who remains their God and their Savior.

In the early days of the Church James in his letter responded to this sense of ordeal and trial by saying this in his opening chapter, Chapter 1 and Verse 2:

*“My brothers and sisters, consider it all joy when you face trials of any kind” – Joy because you know God is at work. It’s not that God is not at work, God is there – “because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance and that endurance have its full effect so that you may be sure and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

At the very place where it seems that God is absent God is there.

This God, the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus, the God of the early church is a God who tests. For some of us this view of God may seem to be strange. We may not have heard these things before. Or we may turn to Jesus’ prayer, Jesus’ own teaching, and say *“Isn’t this a little inconsistent with what we pray Sunday by Sunday in the Lord’s Prayer? Don’t we pray ‘Lead us not into temptation? But deliver us from Evil?’ How are we to handle that phrase, that prayer that we pray Sunday by Sunday? ‘Lead us not into temptation’?”*

Well what I would want to do with that particular petition or request in the Lord’s prayer is to say this: that the translation in English is not the best translation! Not that we’re going to change it when we repeat it Sunday by Sunday . . . though a simple change in translation gets us to the heart of the matter: the addition of the words **“grip of”**!! Jesus is saying that we need to pray that God would not lead us *not into the grip of temptation*; into that place where we fail the test (as happened with the rich ruler); not lead us not into the power of the evil one, where we lose sight of the glory of God; not bring us to a test so terrible that we fail, but, instead (which makes perfect sense) “deliver us from evil.”

Jesus himself was tested and tempted, and therefore we shall be tested as well. But he succeeded without sin . . . and our calling is to hold on to him, no matter what the trial or the test may be, so that it will work out not for evil but for good (check out Hebrews 2:18).

I suspect that Jesus’ prayer in some sense was Abraham’s prayer when he came to his test. And the test he had to face was a fiery ordeal indeed. Let’s turn our thoughts to that now. You may want to open your Bibles to Genesis 22. The issue of faith that was central to God’s testing of Abraham had to do with his son. So here’s the situation leading up to Genesis 22:

God keeps his promise. God is going to give Abraham descendants. He’s going to do it through a child given to Abraham and Sarah. And now they can see this child with their eyes and the question, the issue, the potential problem, becomes this: *Will Abraham and Sarah now place their faith in the child that they see, **or** stick with their faith in the invisible God who gave them the child in the first place?* Will they transfer their allegiance to what they see, or will they maintain their faith in the invisible God whose power brought something out of nothing (at a stage in life when there was no way that they could create this child)?

So let’s read the story. Genesis 22 and at Verse 1.

*After these things* [DR: after Abraham had been on his journey a while, after he had met the God who speaks and calls and directs, the God who promises and keeps his promises, the God who

judges, the God who is patient] *after these things God tested Abraham. God said to him “Abraham!” and Abraham said “Here I am.” God said “Take your son, your only son Isaac* [DR: now, he has another son, Ishmael but this son, Isaac, is the son of promise] *your only son Isaac* [DR: and here we have some echoes which we’re going to hear again in the New Testament in John Chapter 3 in Verse 16 for God so loved the world that he gave *his only son*]– *take your son, your only son Isaac whom you love* [DR: remember the voice on the mount of transfiguration in Matthew 17:5?] *and go to the land of Moriah.* [DR: Moriah is the temple mount in Jerusalem; see 2 Chronicles 3:1. It’s where the Dome of the Rock is today, and in the Dome of the Rock there is a rock which is by tradition the place where Abraham offered up his son. For those in Islam by the way its Ishmael they say who is the son offered up. Of course our scripture says it’s Isaac.] *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 . . .* [DR: Offer my son as a burnt offering? In this command, God is either taking Abraham back to the paganism of the city of Ur, from which he’d come; and from the culture around where the gods demanded child sacrifice; *or*, God has something up his sleeve . . . which Abraham seems to realize; he seems to know that this is a test; that this command is not the kind of command that the God he has come to know would ask of him. Just a test – but not a joke; deadly serious]. . . *and offer him up there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you. So Abraham rose early in the morning.* [DR: John Calvin says that Abraham was unhesitating; swift to obey. He does this early. It may seem irrational but as the Proverb says (3:5,6), Abraham “leans not to his own understanding but trusts in the Lord.” ] *Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac. He cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day* [DR: and here again this phrase is echoed in the New Testament: Jesus was raised “on the third day” so this day is not just the day of sacrifice; it is the day of resurrection!] *On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there and we will worship and then we will come back to you.* [DR: A statement of faith and confidence: “we,” Isaac and me, we are going to return. As the Letter to the Hebrews said, 11:19: “Abraham believed that somehow God would give him back his son by resurrection.”]

*Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac and he carried, he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!”* [DR: things are beginning to twig with Isaac that not all is good or normal here! By the way, I don’t know how you imagine the age of Isaac at this time. Most of our story books have him maybe as a child – but both Jewish and Muslim tradition have him in his 20s or 30s. Whether he’s 10 or 12 or 15 or 20 or 30, he is almost certainly stronger than Abraham at this time, because Abraham’s over 100 years of age. He will be a strong son at this stage and he’s beginning to catch on that something’s wrong.] *And Abraham says “Here I am my son.” And Isaac said “The fire and the wood are here. But where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” And Abraham said “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering my son.”*

*So the two of them walked on together. [DR: And both the Jewish Talmud and the Qur'an say that the son had as much faith as the father here, and willingly, in faith, submitted himself to what he knew was going to happen.] When they came to the place that God had shown him Abraham built an altar there, laid the wood in order, he bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and [DR: in this is a moment of horror] took the knife to kill his son. But . . . the angel of the Lord called to him from Heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham." And Abraham said "Here I am." The angel said "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him." [DR: And some of you may know the paintings by Caravaggio and Rembrandt about this story. Whether you do or not – in them Abraham's large hand is raised, with the knife in it, but the angel's firmly grasps Abraham's hand, restraining him from the final act]. "Abraham, Abraham, 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. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. [DR: Which became, by the way, the motto of the China Inland Mission in the 1800s, initiating a great missionary movement in China which is reaping enormous fruit before our eyes today.] . . . as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."*

And the ordeal, the test was over. And Abraham passed. Abraham passed the test. His faith in God was real. His deepest hope – though he passionately loved his son, his only son – was not in his son but in the God who, as it were, gave life to the dead in giving Abraham and Sarah the child, and who just as surely, even if Abraham had pulled down that knife would have given life to the dead, to Isaac, yet again. And so Abraham's faith was manifested, evidenced, grew, in a way that could never been done in any other way. A faith manifested in this God who speaks and who calls and directs and who promises and who keeps his promises and who judges and who is patient. A faith strengthened in a way that could never have been done otherwise.

I don't know where your faith is today. And I don't know in what areas it needs to be tested or challenged, or grow. But I know that in every one of our lives there is a place where that needs to happen; where we have become "at ease in Zion!" and we need to be bothered by a God who tests us, who says "I love you as you are but I love you too much to leave you where you are. I want your faith to be strong, and grow yet stronger." And we point to somebody else and say I'm not like that; they just have a strong faith than I do!" And God says no, that's not the way to think! Abraham was an ordinary person . . . like you and me . . . and my eye was on him just as my eye is on you. And the path I had for him is in many respects exactly the same path I have for you; and it will include testing!! It's because I love you that you will pass through trials too so that you may know who you are, so that your deepest hopes are exposed, come to light, to be held on to or let go; and so that your faith will grow.

- Maybe it's in the area of money like the rich ruler and we need to figure out what we really trust in.
- Maybe it's in the area of those we love around about us ,and how much we really love God.



- Maybe it's in the area of our reputation in a world which counts our reputation as really important: if people really knew our devotion to God how would that play in the places where we work and where we live?
- Maybe it's in the realm of sex or power or success?

It could be in any of these areas. We each have different areas that we wrestle with. My problem is not yours, yours is not mine. But *there is* an area in *every* one of our lives in which we've settled for less than God's best and God is not content to leave it that way! God wants to do things in our lives which seem to us at times to be of an enormous bother. But it's in those moments, when we face up to those moments as if they were not enemies, but gifts from God, that our faith like Abraham's will not only be tested but will grow.

This is God's passion for you and for me. I trust that we will never have to go through what Abraham went through – though some of you I know have been through fire. But even if we do, keep Abraham in mind, and walk that journey with him, and God will see you through to the end. Hear again some of those words from Genesis 22.

*Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife . . . The angel said 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.*

What is it that we deem so precious, that we are clinging onto? and that we need to let go of?

*And Abraham looked up and saw a ram and called that place The Lord Will Provide.*

God will provide! God will lead us through. He will not lead us into the grip of temptation but will lead us through it . . . Remember: it was in those moments of darkest testing that Abraham's life was changed for good and for God, and he became that man of faith on whom our lives are to be patterned.

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 4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800