

## The Hardest Test

Genesis 22:1-18

One of the most divisive television shows last year was the adaptation of the video game *The Last of Us*. Airing on HBO, it follows a man, Joel, paid to smuggle a girl, Ellie, across a zombie-filled United States, a girl who might hold the key to curing the zombie-causing fungal infections. Both the video game and the TV show have a divisive ending. Having finally reached their goal, Joel finds out that in order to extract the cure from Ellie, she has to die. And instead of letting that happen, he rescues her. The world loses a chance to potentially end the zombie apocalypse, but the father figure saves the girl he's come to think of as a daughter.

According to the creator, Neil Druckmann, when the video game was in development and the ending was placed before focus groups, they were split 50/50 in terms of if Joel, the protagonist, did the right thing, rescuing this girl who he's come to think of as his daughter at the possible cost of saving the world from the fungal zombie plague. But when the focus group was made up of only parents, they were 100% in favor of Joel's actions. As parents, they knew they would do whatever they needed to do to protect their child, even at the cost of something that could be seen as the greater good.

That's part of what makes today's Old Testament lesson so controversial, as well. Parents will do almost anything to protect their children, and here we have a story where a father is asked to sacrifice his son. Why would God test Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his only son? Why would a God who condemns the child sacrifice of Israel's neighbors command one of his most faithful servants to do such a thing? Rabbis and theologians and philosophers have spilled a lot of ink arguing over what this story means, whether Abraham

was right to bind Isaac, if God was right to ask Abraham to do this, and if everyone involved knew events were going to happen the way they ended up happening. It's the hardest test imaginable.

To help us think about this, let's look about ten chapters back, in Genesis 12, when Abraham is called by God to go to a land he's never seen. We're also told Abraham and his wife are old and childless. Yet God chooses them and promises to make a great nation through them. Throughout the next ten chapters and approximately thirty years, God keeps going to Abraham and reminding him of that promise. God, who likes to make something out of nothing, is going to make a great nation out of an old, childless couple to show that it happened only because of God, because it couldn't have happened otherwise.

And so Isaac, when he's finally born, has a great deal of expectation placed upon him. He's the chosen son. He's the one through whom God will fulfill his promise. Finally, Abraham won't have to depend on his nephew or another relative to be his heir. God's fulfilled his promise, and Abraham's genes and legacy will live on.

With all of those expectations, it would have been easy for Abraham to have begun to make Isaac into an idol. If Isaac wasn't just the fulfillment of God's promises, but was instead the one who was going to make the promises come true himself, Abraham's focus had shifted away from God.

And so, God tested Abraham and told him to take Isaac to a mountain and offer him up to God. Abraham followed what God had commanded, until the angel said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for

now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” Abraham had passed the hardest test, had shown that God was who he trusted above all else.

When the early Christians were trying to understand how God was at work in this story, this is how they explained it. “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Abraham trusted that God would fulfill his promise somehow, even if he didn't understand how. If God had promised to bless the world through Isaac, then God would make that happen, even if it required bringing him back from the dead. Abraham trusted in God, and God passed that test. He provided a substitute sacrifice to save Isaac.

Abraham, too, passed the test. The test was not a temptation to do evil or to trap him. Instead, it was meant to strengthen Abraham and to build him up. The test shows that Abraham will love, fear, obey, worship, and serve God. The testing shows God who Abraham is, shows Abraham who God is, and Abraham who he is himself.

The place that God provided a substitute sacrifice would continue to be the place where that happened. Later in the Old Testament, we're told that King David offers a sacrifice here to stop a plague. After that, we're told that is where Solomon places the altar for the temple, a place where sacrifices would be offered up in the place of those whose sins demand punishment.

More than that, we see ourselves in the story. Just as we deserve to die for our sins, God provides a substitute for us. Jesus is the sacrifice we could never offer but need more than anything. We would not give ourselves to God, so he gave himself to us. He died so that we might live. By his sacrifice, we are forgiven, and love is shown to God.

Not only did God know the pain he put Abraham through, he knows the pain Isaac went through, as well. When we use this story of the almost sacrifice of Isaac as a parallel to Jesus, we can sometimes make both stories sound like some sort of divine child abuse. But when we remember that God is Triune, and that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are all God, then we know that God wasn't an abusive father killing his one and only son. God gave Himself for us. Jesus passed the hardest test by remaining sinless throughout his time on earth, and remained obedient to His Father's will. Jesus, the Son of God, takes upon himself the sin of the whole world on the cross. God is instead loving, doing what needed to be done to save us all.

Understanding that, what God has done for what our sins deserve, is what this season of Lent is all about.

It's the hardest test we will have to face, trusting in God in the face of circumstances that make us doubt God. God calls us to sacrifice anything that keeps us from him. More than that, God gives us more than we could ever imagine to replace what we give up. Those who give up their families to follow Jesus get a new church family. Those who give up their earthly treasures gain treasures in heaven. Those who lose their lives will find it. Those who are ridiculed on earth will be called blessed. All because Jesus passed the hardest test for us.

Pastor David Beagley  
Memorial Lutheran Church & Student Center,  
Ames IA Lent 1B February 18, 2024