

You Did WHAT?
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Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14

There have been many moments in Abraham and Sarah's life that lead me to question what they heck they think they are doing...

Like that time when famine hit, so Abraham decided to move his clan to Egypt where the food is plentiful. His dear wife Sarah, even at the age of 75, was a beautiful woman and so he hatches a plan to pass her off as his sister so that he will not be killed by any romantic rivals. *"Wait. Hang on, you did WHAT?"*

Or I think of that time when God came to Abraham in a dream, promising land and progeny. The years are passing, and the couple is still childless. Abraham and Sarai decide to take matters into their own hands and Abraham has a child with one of his slave girls, Hagar. They name this child Ishmael. *"Wait, hang on, you all did WHAT?"*

Soon after, mysterious travelers show up telling the couple to get ready for parenthood, at the tender age of 90 and 100. And it actually happens! Isaac, whose name means laughter, is born. Parental love twists into mistrust. Sarah feels uncertain about Isaac's future inheritance because of the existence of his older brother and convinces Abraham to send Ishmael and his mother Hagar out into the wilderness to die. *"Wait, you did WHAT?"*

But it wasn't until Abraham and his last remaining child began making their way up the mountain to God's altar that the tension in the story really starts...

We all know something about journeys up mountains.
Maybe your mountain is the pile of responsibilities you have at work,
Or it's finding a replacement for a job you've lost,
Or maybe it's the mountain of family life and all its blessed dysfunction,
Or it's the grief and anxiety from all the newspaper headlines,
Perhaps your mountain is a medical diagnosis,
Or it's yet another unexpected phone call from your child's teacher,

Or the mountain you climb is laying a loved one to rest,
and figuring out the new life without them that now must be forged...

Whether we admit it or not; there are some altars we can only come to after
a difficult journey... and that was certainly the case for Abraham that day.

That day he found himself on a wild and windy mountain,
Where the trail led to a terrible fork in the road.
That day when neither path held any good choices,
Where he could either turn left and avoid the inevitable or turn right
and hurt the one he loved most...

Maybe this story appears front and center in Genesis, where none of us can
miss it, because the hard truth is that the world turns upside down for
"people of faith" more often than we like to admit.

I know there are folks here who know a mountain like this,
who know what it's like to hear the God who would dare ask for everything.
You know how it feels to come to that place where all our friends' pious
platitudes do us no good. You know what it's like to climb and climb and
climb, until you come to a fork where neither direction has a good outcome...

And I'll bet for you, today's scripture isn't so easy to brush off. Because you
know it's not an easy path. We take what little comfort we have, and we
trudge on... until we are left up there alone on that mountain, where there
is nothing left to do, and nowhere else to go.

And when there were no good choices left; that's exactly when God showed
up. Not to snatch us from the mountaintop, but to keep our hands from
doing our own kind of violence and making it so much worse.

On that wild and windy mountain, Abraham found out exactly what it means
when we say **"God is love."**

Sometimes being in relationship with the real God hurts like hell.
Often it's bewildering. We'll be inching along in the dark, hoping that we are
moving forward and not in a circle, with no vision of where the relationship
is taking us.

You who are here today bearing the scuffs from the journey that brought you to the altar,
You who are here weary from coming down off that mountain,
You who know this God who meets us when there are no good choices left;
You who have met this God, you know that love means more than a band-aid, a pat on the back or a buck-up speech.

Scripture calls this story a test, but I wonder what kind of test and who is testing who.

I wonder if this is more about Abraham listening to the voices of other gods, when the One True God steps in to call off the horror.

Stay with me, here...

Perhaps this story is more about a human being testing God's boundaries, finding out along the way how different this new God really is.

Clearly, this God puts a definitive end to the practice of human sacrifice, grabbing Abraham's hand (and by extension, our hands too) and taking the knife away.

This is a God that tells us it is not okay for any of us to sacrifice each other on any altar.

Make no mistake—there are many Gods today we still choose to follow whose voices seem perfectly reasonable.

They ask us to sacrifice our children on the altar of prosperity, of national security, of morality.

They ask us to sacrifice our children for the sake of our national reputation, our economy, our global power.

They ask us to sacrifice our children for profit, for safety, for our understanding of what is right.

They tell us it's okay to sacrifice some children, or some poor people, or some elderly people.

These false gods surround us, asking us to forget that fifty four years ago yesterday four little girls were killed in Sunday School when their church was bombed because their skin was the wrong color — sacrificed to the God of violence.

They ask us to forget that poverty fuels violence that has claimed the lives of thousands of children in our county alone—sacrificed to the God of apathy.

They ask us to forget that even the products we purchase often fuel a cycle of violence and despair that destroys the lives of children—sacrificed to the God of convenience.

They shield our eyes from the reality that more people are enslaved today than at any other time in history¹, that sporting events like the Super Bowl are also major sex-trafficking events, and that the vast majority of people affected are children—sacrificed to the God of instant gratification.

These false gods are all around us, whispering in our ears that the many ways we sacrifice our children are perfectly normal. What's one more time? It's good for us, it'll prove something, it's cost-effective, it'll be okay.

And so the test... will we listen to the voice of the God who says: Give me the knife. It is not okay to sacrifice one another on any altar. Period. Full stop. No more. I am a God of abundant life. I am Love. I am hope and justice and peace. Trust in me. My faithfulness is not contingent on your faithfulness, and good thing! Those other gods may have compelling voices, but their call always leads to destruction, and my call leads to life. This I promise.

Scripture doesn't tell us how Abraham and Isaac felt as they walked back down the mountain. Perhaps they were joyful. I'm sure Abraham was relieved. Could Isaac learn to trust his father again? What would Sarah say when she heard about what happened? Back down they went, as we all have to - eventually.

When you find yourself on that wild and windy mountain, when all of your good choices have been exhausted; remember that the one who stays your hand is the One who will meet you. This God will come, bringing no lectures about what you should have done, just compassion and provision for the journey. This is a God whose love is so great; it goes with us all the way to the cross. And may this God bless you, weary traveler and bless all our children. Amen.

¹ The 2016 global slavery index, funded by the Walk Free Foundation, says 45.8 million people are trapped in some form of slavery. (<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jun/01/46-million-people-living-as-slaves-latest-global-index-reveals-russell-crowe>)