

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.

*After these things...*

So begins our reading from Genesis today, a story that is both famous and infamous – compelling and horrifying: the so-called “Binding of Isaac” or “The Command to Sacrifice Isaac.”<sup>1</sup>

It is the culmination of a series of episodes in Abraham and Sarah’s life that began when God called them to “*go from your country... to the land that I will show you,*” with the promise that their descendants would be “*a great nation*” and “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” (Genesis 12:1-3)

But Abraham and Sarah began to doubt God’s promise, as the years went by with no children, and since it appeared that they couldn’t have children of their own, Sarah gave Hagar, an enslaved Egyptian woman in their household, to Abraham as a second wife – and Ishmael was born.

Not too long after, Sarah miraculously gave birth to Isaac, setting into motion terrible events.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon draws heavily from Salt Project’s Lectionary Commentary for the Fourth Week after Pentecost.

Today's story begins, "*After these things...*" then, because it is a continuation of the story that we read last week, when Abraham and Sarah contemptuously dismissed Hagar and Ishmael, exiling them into the wilderness so that Isaac alone would inherit God's blessing.

That exile was effectively a death sentence, as was brought home when we read about Hagar and Ishmael wandering until the water in their skin was dry. Despairing, she pleaded with God, "*Do not let me look on the death of the child.*"

But God answered her, this woman who previously in Genesis was the first person to name God – calling him the "*God who sees.*" And see her, God did.

A voice from heaven spoke to her, guiding her to water, and reestablishing God's promise to make a great nation of Ishmael.

All of this happened unbeknownst to Abraham and Sarah, who now believed Isaac to be the sole heir of God's promise.

Which is where we pick up today, with the second half of a story that was written as consecutive, parallel accounts meant to be read together.

In both stories the central drama was an apparent death march for one of Abraham's children, with God saving the child at the last moment and reaffirming the promise that God would make "*a great nation*" of them.

But before we get there in both accounts, we first encounter terror – first no water in the desert, and second the makings of a burnt offering to God.

It is important to note that God desires neither Ishmael nor Isaac to die.

These stories are the climax of the arc of Abraham and Sarah's narrative which highlights their faithfulness and courage, as well as the ways they fell short and had fallen prey to the human foibles of power and jealousy.

After effectively sacrificing one son, today's story is about testing Abraham with the apparent sacrifice of the other.

The word for "test" used here – *nasah* – is a clue as to the meaning of what is happening. It is the same word used in Deuteronomy for the trial God gives the Israelites in the wilderness, expressly "*in order to humble you.*" (Deuteronomy 8:2)

The death of Isaac would not only mean the death of a beloved son, it would mean the death of God's promise, and the dream that Abraham nurtured for years, that his descendants would become a great nation.

At first glance this can seem petty, like God giving Abraham a taste of his own medicine to teach him a lesson: you threw away one son, now see how you like it when I tell you to do the same with the second one.

But it can also be read not just as a humbling experience, but as a test to distil Abraham's faith, like that of the refiner's fire.

After a life of obedience to God interspersed with decisions rooted in self-interest, this is the moment for Abraham to fully decide where his loyalties lay.

To follow the command to bind and sacrifice Isaac is to show fidelity for fidelity's sake. Abraham's willingness to do so demonstrated that his faith was no longer a camouflaged strategy for serving himself.

Seeing that Abraham was truly listening, God kept speaking – Abraham’s hand was stayed, Isaac survived, and Abraham walked down the mountain changed.

He named that mountaintop a phrase that is often translated “God Will Provide,” but which literally means “God Will See.” It is an evocative echo of Hagar’s name for God.

As one Biblical commentary points out, if Hagar testified that “God sees” those whom the powers that be attempt to exclude and erase, Abraham testified that “God sees” the hidden motives of our hearts, our “offerings,” and our faith – and will provide whatever humbling rehabilitation we require.<sup>2</sup>

This is our take-away from this story, that God sees.

God sees us and God continues to reach out to us and meet us where we are, setting before us opportunities to grow and do better lest we settle into a faith centered around our own comfort.

It’s like the quote from Maya Angelou, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

It is not easy, but it is part of God’s unending call to us: to walk faithfully and keep listening. For when we do, our very lives become an offering pleasing to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Salt Project Lectionary Commentary for the Fourth Week after Pentecost.