

Will you trust this God?

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.
The 2nd Sunday of Lent. Yr. B. March 12, 2006. (Text: Genesis 22:1-14)*

We religious professionals, pastors and theologians, preachers and teachers, speak so glibly of God and God's ways – as if we understood everything. As if we “knew.” We put forward our creeds and catechisms, and publish books to convince each other that we've unraveled the secrets of the eternal and figured God out. We love our dogmas and definitions. We say “This is what God is doing. And this is what God is going to do.” —We behave as if our doctrines limit God's options and God must conform to the dictates of our reason.

We should be embarrassed at such presumption. Our God is too small! God's name, revealed to Moses at the burning bush in the wilderness, is “*I am that I am.*” Another way of reading that is, “*I will be what I will be.*” All we can ever “know” is what God himself has revealed – nothing more. Beyond God's revelation there is only holy mystery. And the wisest posture for mortals in the face of holy mystery is what the Bible calls “the fear of the Lord” —deep humility. ...On our knees. ...Or better, prostrate with our faces in the dust.

I've been talking about professional religious types, people like *me*. There's another group, though, and that's people like *you*: the faithful, the church members, the community that sits in the pews every week and listens to the religious professionals. Shaped by what we have said, most church folks have come to believe in a small, manageable God. A convenient God. A God whose role in the universe is make us comfortable and happy. (Our religion is, after all, mostly about *us*.) We behave as if God's role is to serve our needs and facilitate our getting what we think we should have. We figure that if we play by the rules laid down by religious professionals, God surely will provide what we want. The common imagination – at least in America – is that there's a divine-human “contract” which goes like this: If people go to church as often as they're able (given the requirements of our business and social lives), and if they donate some money (more than a token amount, but it doesn't have to be a fortune) and if they don't engage in any truly wicked behavior (petty sins of the flesh are forgivable), God promises to deal gently with them. If we hold up our end of this contract, God should hold up his.

Now let's think about Abraham and Isaac, and the terrible story of the sacrifice.

First, I want to remind you of the background of this story —part of God's ancient revelation of himself, a part we know about but few of us *ponder*. Long, long ago – when the country we now know only too well as Iraq was the cradle of civilization – God spoke to an elderly man named Abraham, maybe in a dream. We don't know. For his own inscrutable purposes, God chose Abraham and made a covenant with him, and the terms of the covenant went something like this: if Abraham would leave his family and his home and go to a far-off land that God promised to show him, then God would give Abraham and his descendants that land to be theirs forever. And as part of this covenant, he promised that Abraham and his wife Sarah – old as they were – would, indeed, become parents and their eventual offspring would be as numerous as the stars of the sky. Through Abraham all the people of the earth would be blessed. He would be “blessed to be a blessing.”

Abraham did not take this visionary experience lightly. He didn't wake up the next morning and say to himself, “Wow. I wonder what *that* was all about,” and keep right on worshipping the Moon Goddess. Abraham *believed* what this as yet unknown God told him, and he *acted* on it. —And everything worked out according to God's promise. Abraham was led far from home, to Canaan where he received a rich land to be his own. He acquired flocks and herds and servants and all the trappings of a Mesopotamian potentate. Finally, he and Sarah became parents when they were close to a hundred years old. You probably all learned this story as children. Abraham was The Man of Faith – with capital letters. God spoke; Abe believed and acted.

Can you imagine the joy of those two when Isaac was born? Here was the Child of the Promise, the seal on the covenant God had made with Abraham, the fulfillment of all their prayers and hopes and dreams! Don't you know young Isaac had everything a boy could want? He probably had his own camel when he was eight! This son of their old age was *everything* to Abraham and Sarah. If they lived in our day, Abraham would be

the kind of father who has a camera in his hands all the time and who fills the hard drive of his new Mac with nothing but pictures of his precious boy. —100 megabytes of Isaac! All Isaac all the time!

Then, after Isaac had grown to be 15 or maybe a bit older, the Bible says God decided to *test* Abraham. But God didn't tell Abraham it was "only a test"! Abraham just knew what God told him – the God whose every word he had always trusted and obeyed. God said "*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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you.*" Abraham chose to obey God, awful as God's will seemed.

We're doing a study of the Lord's Prayer on Thursday nights this Lent. In a few weeks we'll come to the part of the Lord's Prayer that says: "*Lead us not into temptation.*" Another way of saying that is: "*Do not bring us to the test.*" In that model for our prayer, Jesus is saying "*It happened to me. Pray that it doesn't happen to you, too!*" But the Biblical record of God's dealing with human beings is that there are times when God *does* bring us to the test. —He tested Abraham. He tested his own Son. And it's possible – perhaps even likely – that God will also test you and me.

What will we do if we're put to the test? Let's hope that, if such a testing comes, we'll have learned from Abraham and we'll have learned from Jesus: *No matter what happens... no matter what... keep trusting God!*

Abraham took his only son, the delight of his life, his source of joy and the only assurance that his name would be remembered on earth, and he set out to go to the place of sacrifice. Genesis doesn't tell us, can't tell us, what Abraham was feeling. But we can guess. What was he thinking? We can't know that for sure either, but we're told what he answered when Isaac – who knew what sacrifices called for – said, "*Father, here is the fire, the wood, and the knife, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*" Abraham answered, "*God himself will provide the lamb, my son.*"

"God himself will provide the Lamb." That's the message of this story, perhaps the message of Scripture itself: *God will provide.* Abraham trusted God, but God *tested* that trust. There's something else in this story that might be easy to miss: *Isaac* trusted God, too, and his trust was also tested! Nobody else was up on Mount Moriah except frail, one hundred-and-fifteen year-old Abraham and strapping, fifteen year-old Isaac. But young Isaac yields himself for the sacrifice. He could easily have pushed his old father down on the ground without harming him and run away. But he didn't try to escape. Instead, he probably helped build the altar and put the wood on it. Then he climbed up on it and let himself be bound. He watched as Abraham picked up the knife. —Then God stopped the test and 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.*"

"God himself will provide the lamb." Jesus told his disciples more than once, "*The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*" But in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, "*Father, if it might be your will, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.*"

As we walk on towards Good Friday and Easter, please consider Isaac, Abraham's only son, carrying the wood for his sacrifice, stretched out on the altar on Mount Moriah – an altar of his own obedient making – ready to accept the will of God, 'til God stopped the test, and said: "*Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.*" Then consider Jesus, "the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth," carrying his heavy cross to the hill of Golgotha – only a short walk from where Abraham and Isaac had built their altar so long before. But nobody stopped this test, because on Golgotha *man was, in Christ, putting God to the test.* —And God passed the test. God did not withhold his only Son, but gave him up for us. God kept faith with Abraham. He provided the Lamb, the Lamb who has taken away the sin of the world.

How big is *your* God? What claim does God have on your life? ...On your trust?

If God brings you to the test – as he brought Abraham, as he brought Jesus – will you put your faith in this God and trust him, *no matter what happens? ...no matter what?*