

*Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"*

*"Here I am," he replied.*

*Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."*

*Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.*

*He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham,*

*"Father?"*

*"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.*

*"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"*

*Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."*

*And the two of them went on together. When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven,*

*"Abraham! Abraham!"*

*"Here I am," he replied.*

*"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."*

*Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."*

What kind of a God? What kind of a God asks a person to sacrifice a child? What kind of a God does that? Who is this God in whom we profess belief that Abraham would be asked to take his son out into the wilderness, hike with him for three days, only to have their father/son bonding time end in a blood bath. What kind of a God would ask such a thing?

And, what kind of a father would do it? We hear news stories about folks who abuse, rape, and even murder their own children and then tell anyone who will listen that they did it because that's what God told them to do. We call these people "wacko's" or "fanatics". We arrest them, try them, and put them in jail. And yet, it was one such as this, one who was willing to kill his

own son, who we call “Father Abraham”—one of the most highly revered persons in both the Jewish and Christian faiths.

And this would lead us to ask—what kind of a people are we that we believe in such a God and proudly claim Abraham as an ancestor? Many on the outside would call us “duped.” They think we’re silly for believing in God and following Jesus. One of the men in my Toastmasters Club says that religion is just something that people make up and then propagate so we don’t feel like this life is all there is to our existence. He says that religion exists just to give us the warm fuzzies.

Well, the only kind of warm fuzzy I get from the Abraham and Isaac story is heartburn. It’s perplexing, complicated, and confusing. From what I know about God, it just doesn’t make sense to me. I’ve heard many people express similar concerns. My college roommate is ready to throw out the baby with the bathwater when it comes to this story. It haunts her and she struggles with her faith because of it. In our Bible 101 Class, many of us expressed our dismay at this and other Old Testament stories that portray God in ways that make us uncomfortable and uneasy. Many of us would really rather just skip this story altogether.

And yet, we can’t really do that. No matter how bad it may seem, there’s something to be learned from it, some wisdom to be gleaned. And the folks who write the Bible commentaries and teach Bible classes in colleges and seminaries have tried to do just that. There are many interpretations available.

One interpretation is that this is a story about trust in God—all throughout, Abraham places his complete trust in God and Isaac places his complete trust in his father Abraham. From this interpretation we learn that—in the end—Abraham’s trust in God was well-founded in that God provided a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place. And yet, I wonder, was the mental anguish worth it? And, is having that kind of blind trust really such a good idea? Perhaps it is when it comes to trusting God but what about Isaac’s trust of Abraham. In the very act of trusting his father he was endangering his own life. We live in a world where child and other forms of abuse have become all too commonplace. And in so many cases, the abuse was inflicted upon the victim by someone they trusted—a parent, uncle, teacher, or family friend. Is it really wise for the church to espouse relationships of blind trust based on roles? I think not. We need to learn for ourselves and teach our children that trust is something that is earned and even then, can sometimes be broken. So, there might be something to the interpretation that the story is about trust, and yet we must be careful in how we apply and teach that application—especially when it comes to children.

Another interpretation of this story that has been proposed is that it was a test—God was testing Abraham’s faith and commitment. God wanted to know if Abraham loved God even more than he loved his only son. And, it seems that Abraham passed the test in the end. This interpretation goes along with a story from the New Testament in which Jesus tells us that we must love God more than we love our mothers, fathers, children—well, more than we love anything else, really. And I’m not arguing with Jesus, I too believe that we are to love God above all other people and things. And yet, I believe that in loving one another we ARE loving God. The divine spirit of God dwells not only in heaven or nature or wherever else we feel it,

but also in each other. So often, we encounter God not through a burning bush or booming voice from the heavens, but rather in the words and deeds of another. And so how can the willingness to kill one of God's beloved creatures be an act of faithfulness? For me, this interpretation falls short of the mark too.

Yet another interpretation is that God made a mistake. Now, grab a hymnal and guard your heads from the lightening bolts on this one and remember that this is an interpretation put forth by a Biblical scholar—not by yours truly. Some folks think that God is a living, breathing being that makes mistakes and changes as a result of them. In their view, God is like us in that God makes choices and also has some regrets. Adherents to this school of thought propose that, when God flooded the whole earth and saved only Noah and his family—God expressed regret and sent the rainbow as a kind of apology and promise to never do something like that again. This interpretation of God as a wayward bully doesn't sit well with me but it really works for some folks and so it's only fair for me to mention it. Following this train of thought, some interpret the Abraham and Isaac story as an example of God getting a little power-hungry and asking the unspeakable and then, upon realizing what was about to happen, God's mind changes and the unthinkable act is halted and a ram just suddenly appears to take the place of Isaac. This interpretation also falls short of the mark for me.

None of the interpretations work for me. Each offers some helpful insights, but I still don't have an answer when it comes to interpreting or understanding this story of Abraham and Isaac. The God of this story is just not the God that I know.

And, strangely enough, that could be the only answer I really need to live with this story, and others like it, from the Bible. I hadn't really thought about it that way until I went to a Spirituality Discernment Group a couple of weeks ago. I had already started studying for this sermon at the time and was really stymied. I couldn't discern what God wanted me to be learning from it. I didn't know how to, as we say in the trade, "Preach It!" Usually, when it comes to preaching, I look for the Good News, the Gospel message that brings new insight or life to a passage and to our lives. And I wasn't finding it.

And so it was with a troubled spirit that I went to my group meeting that day. And I was completely knocked out by something one of the women there said—in a context totally unrelated to this passage, indeed I hadn't even mentioned that I was struggling with it at that point. When talking about something that had happened to her years ago, she said, "But I can't really know God then. I can only know the God of the present, the God I'm experiencing right now." Well now, there have been six or seven times in my life when the light bulb turned on and shone so brightly in my brain that I was speechless and this was one of them. What I'd been doing with this Abraham and Isaac story—and not just in preparing for this sermon but indeed since the first time I was old enough to really critique it—was trying to know God in that story. I was trying to justify God, make excuses for God, criticize God, and understand God. People have asked me about this story and I have felt the need to be able to explain it, to make it seem better, to help them make sense of it. And what I realized when my friend said what she did was that I'd been attempting the impossible. How could I begin to figure out the nature of God? Who was I to judge and critique? And instead of feeling belittled or "put in my place", I

felt free—oh so free! Because whoever or whatever the God of that story is is not the God I have experienced in my life and I guess that is, in a nutshell, why I find that story so puzzling.

The God I've known and know even now is the God who inspired my parents to show me unconditional love each and every day of my life. I know of God's unconditional love because I've experienced that kind of love from my parents. And I know of God's fierce longing for me to love God because of my own experience as a parent. I want Nathan's love and I can't coerce it and I can't try to earn it and I can't demand it and I won't try to test it—I can only love him and hope that he loves me back. And that must be how God feels about us—such a longing for our love. And I know of God's mercy because of the many times and ways in which I have experienced the mercy of others—especially Corey. He has been kind and gentle with me at times when I deserved to be treated with anger and frustration. His patience has known no bounds and his forgiveness no end. And I have known God's acceptance through congregations of people such as this who have shown me love despite my faults and have welcomed me into their lives with open arms. Sure, I've had my fair share of instances in which I've felt God was testing me, times when I knew God was calling me to do something I didn't want to do, and times when doing what God was calling me to do was uncomfortable, awkward, and sometimes even scary. But even then, I couldn't relate to the God of the Abraham and Isaac story. That's not the God I knew. And, of course it's not. We can only really ever know the God that we know just as we can only really ever know people who we really know. No matter how much I might read about Tom Cruise, how many pictures of him I stare upon longingly, how many interviews with him I watch on television—I do not and cannot really know him because I've never even met him. This isn't to say I wouldn't be willing to meet him should the opportunity present itself . . . but you understand. God is no different. It is the same God—this God of Abraham and Isaac and this God of Robin—and yet I cannot know God as Abraham and Isaac did. I can only know the God I know.

I remember being at a meeting of the Ohio Conference of the United Church of Christ and one of the preachers told a story that relates to this. And now I realize that I'm only now really appreciating what he had to say that day. At the time, I didn't really understand but for some reason I remember. He took a bite out of an apple. He said—you can't taste my apple. Only I know how this apple tastes. You could take a bite out of this same apple, but it won't taste the same to you as it does to me and I can't really explain to you how this apple tastes to me because you're not me. I now understand what he meant. Sure, we could all take a bite out of an apple and use adjectives like, sweet, tart, or ripe to describe its taste. But you can't know how the taste of a Macintosh apple takes me right back to my childhood, sitting under a tree with our cocker spaniel Charlie as we both ate the apples that hung from the tree. You can't know how the taste of a red delicious apple always makes me think of my dad and the way he used to eat a red delicious apple everyday as he drove me to school and somewhere between the bridge over Mill Creek and County Road M I would feel a sudden gush of air as he rolled down the window to throw the core into the ditch. You can't know that same thing from an apple just like I can't know all of the feelings and memories that the taste of an apple might elicit in you.

And so, too, it is with our God. We share the same God, but each of us knows God in different ways. And if you're blessed enough to not be able to relate to the God of the Abraham and Isaac story, all the more power to you. We don't need to know God in that way in order for us

to know God in our own way. And quite frankly, for me, that is Gospel, Good News, inspiring and life giving information. I don't need to know it all, be able to explain it all, or even believe it all in order for me to know God, to love God, and to be loved God. It's nice to know that there are some things that I cannot know and to just leave it at that.