

“The Longest Climb”

Genesis 22:1-10

Series: Summer Getaways

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

June 26, 2022

It was not the highest mountain he'd ever seen. More like an above average hill. At times, he could not even pick out its peak from the adjoining slopes. This was not a Grand Teton, a Matterhorn or a Kilimanjaro. No clouds encircled its mid reaches, no snow cap crowned its summit. Just a bald spot surrounded by plunging valleys.

It was not much of a mountain. But to Abraham, it might as well be Everest. Scaling Mount Moriah will be the longest climb of his life. Its elevation will not test his strength, stamina or endurance. It will, in fact, test his faith.

Across his hundred years of life, Abraham knew many trials. Some he failed. Most he passed. For the first three quarters of his century, the great Patriarch lived a life of prosperity and obscurity. Then the Lord called his name and told him to leave home and kindred. This is not one of the false gods of his neighbors. Abraham is certain the Voice belongs to El Shaddai – God Almighty, the Lord, literally God of the Mountains. The Voice promises him spacious lands, descendants as numerous as the starry hosts, and best of all, a flood of blessings that will pour through him to all the nations. So Abraham and his wife Sarah pull up tent stakes and walk over the edge of their horizon.

For the next twenty-five years they follow the unpredictable Voice. At an age when most of us are retired, this elderly couple begins one of the greatest, most arduous sojourns in history. There are moments when Abraham is so scared he lies to save his skin and almost loses his wife. Yet he is also courageous enough to command armies and free his kidnapped nephew Lot. Most times, he deeply believes God will keep His promises. But occasionally, doubt and distrust drive him to make alternate plans, in case God doesn't come through.

And who can blame him? Years roll into decades and Abraham and Sarah still do not own a single acre of land or cradle a single child of their own. When the Lord finally announces the child will arrive in a year, they both laugh. Is it doubt that causes them to double over? Surely by now it is too late for these nonagenarians. But God has the last laugh. As promised, Sarah delivers a baby boy. His name? Isaac. It means “laughter.” Abraham lets out many chuckles, like a steam valve relieving long built up pressure. He loves to show off the boy to their neighbors and servants. He holds up the tiny infant to glimpse the star-flecked sky and whispers, “So shall your descendants be.” When Isaac learns to ride, Abraham takes him to see the length of the land that will be his inheritance.

A decade passes. Despite the arthritis in his joints, the loss of several teeth and all of his hair, despite hazy eye sight and muffled hearing, Abraham still feels young because of Isaac. The boy's dark curly hair, curious brown eyes, deeply tanned skin and mischievous smile are the pride of his parents. In a few years, Isaac will pass into

manhood and take over the family holdings. God keeps His promise and Abraham keeps his faith. It is a satisfying conclusion to tortuous journey.

But it is not over yet. God saves the worst for last.

Abraham cannot remember how many years it's been since he last heard the Voice. But this time, it wakes him out of a deep sleep in his tent. "Abraham," it whispers. "Here I am, Lord," the old man replies, rubbing his still shut eyes. "I want you to sacrifice a burnt offering to me on a mountain I will show you in Moriah." "Yes, my Lord," Abraham agrees. "What would you like a lamb, a ram, a goat or a calf?" "No, Abraham," the Voice replies, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and sacrifice him." Each phrase feels like a jagged blade pushed ever deeper into his soul.

It's likely the old patriarch never returned to bed that night. So many turbulent questions swirl through his mind. The Voice forces him to choose between his son and his God. A mountain of doubt and distrust rises up before him. After all the years and miles, Abraham thought he knew and understood the Lord. Yes, the idols of other religions demand the sacrifice of children. It is all too common in his day. Yet he never suspects *his* Lord will have such a monstrous appetite. And why does God call him to leave home, promise him land and descendants, give him a miraculous child and then, when all the pieces are finally in place, burn it all up? He is afraid to tell the sleeping Sarah about his severe mission. How can he explain to her what he does not comprehend?

Before the rose tint of daybreak, Abraham rouses his son and two servants. Without explanation, he orders them to pack provisions while he saddles the donkey and splits the wood. Across the dry and unforgiving desert they move in a silent dreadful procession. By day, Isaac often leaves the path to scramble over rocks or poke into crevices. At night he throws sticks into the fire and dances by its light. But Abraham just plods along on the donkey, lost in his thoughts. One day passes, then two. Before noon on the third, Abraham lifts his eyes and spies the hilltop of Moriah, the place God directed him to go. "Stay here with the donkey," he commands his servants, "while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham catches himself saying, "*we* will come back to you." Is it a lie or a slip of the tongue? Is the truth too hard to admit or does he believe there is still a way out of this?

Turning to Isaac, he loads the boy down with the logs. The poor child is like a condemned prisoner compelled to carry the shovel to dig his own grave. He still does not know why his father is so silent and sullen. Isaac notices the lack of joy that always lit up his father's face whenever they worshiped God. Abraham takes up the knife and the burning torch. He doesn't want the boy to play with them and get hurt. Then the irony of that thought strikes him full force. Up the slope they climb, the ancient, arthritic father and the heavily laden boy. The climb seems endless.

The long silence of their ascent is finally broken by the child. "Father?" he says. "Yes, my son?" Abraham replies, eyes fixed forward. "You carry the fire. I have the wood. But haven't we forgotten something?" "Forgotten something, my son?" "Why the lamb, father. Where's the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham fights back the tears.

Then unexpected words tumble out of his mouth. “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Why did he say that? Does he believe it? God always provided in the past. He saved Sarah when Abraham foolishly turned her over to Pharaoh. He plucked Lot out of Sodom before it went up in smoke. He protected Abraham from the threats and attacks of Canaanite tribes. And the Lord, against all odds, blessed the elderly couple with this beautiful child. So why, now, does He want the boy back? Abraham, the friend of God, is caught between two agonizing questions:

Why does God test the one’s He loves?
Will God provide what I need?

The first questions God’s love, the second His power. Why does a loving God put me through such a trial? Is God strong enough to help me out of this? Some think the Lord is a cruel taskmaster, always putting us through painful and difficult trials, always demanding we prove our love for Him. Others prefer a God that waits upon us, who satisfies all our needs and comforts all our hurts and requires little of us. Is God harsh and severe or soft and sympathetic? God tests Abraham. But at the same time, Abraham tests God. He wants to know just what kind of God he’s been following all these years. There is no rational explanation, no logical solution, no possible resolution he can figure out. There is no way out. There is only one thing Abraham can do: he has to trust the God who gave him this child. He must keep climbing.

When the two reach the windswept summit, Abraham gathers stones for the altar. Like most boys, Isaac loves piling up rocks with his father. It is heartbreaking for the old father to watch his child, full of life, run to and fro gathering stones for his deathbed. Then the wood is heaped on the altar. When a stick or two fall off, Isaac quickly puts them back in place.

Now comes the dreadful moment. Wordlessly, Abraham turns to his son with the rope in hand and steps toward him. Confusion and then horror break across the child’s face. He wrestles and struggles as the cords wind about his arms and legs, cut into his wrists and ankles. He cries and screams as his father, summoning all his strength, lifts him unto the pyre. Hot tears stream down both their faces. And then, with a swift and precise motion, Abraham lifts the gleaming knife into the burning sunlight. Isaac closes his eyes as he waits for the jagged blade to plunge into him. And then...

Nothing. The boy opens his eyes to see his father raise his head, listen and look. Suddenly, the arm that held aloft the knife comes sweeping down towards Isaac’s chest. With a single slice, Abraham cut the ropes which bind his son, Isaac, the one he loves. He sets him free. They offer on the altar a ram trapped in pricker bushes— a ram God provides. Abraham explains to his son that it was a test. The Lord wants to see if Abraham will give Him the one he loves the most. Will Abraham trust Him to provide? God hopes to learn if Abraham will believe in Him even when it makes no sense.

Testing will come – and not necessarily from God. Every day we face a host of decisions and dilemmas. Some are minor and easy to solve. The difficult ones are called double binds – a decision between two hard choices. The right choice is usually the

harder one. Exercise is important, but lying on the couch binging on Netflix feels better. A decision between something right and something unhealthy or selfish is easy to spot although not always easy to do – just ask someone with an addiction. A decision between something good and something better – such as working on your home vs. helping a neighbor in need - is more difficult. The hardest is deciding between the highest good and the best of all. It is the highest good to care for and protect your child but the best is to trust God. Normally these are aligned – except in Abraham’s case. In the history of the world there are those, like Abraham, who were called upon to face the hardest tests but that does not mean you must. Nor should you assume every difficult mountain you climb or decision you make is a test from God.

Yet if you continue with God, if you follow Jesus, the tests will come and they will likely get harder. Abraham faced many tests across his century of life, the hardest one was at the end. We should not be surprised. The math test you take in college is far more complex and challenging than the one in second grade. Why?

Testing helps you Learn. Tests are given so we can learn and know something. You take a test to demonstrate you know how to bake bread, drive a car, form a chemical compound, or perform bypass surgery. When you face a time of testing, a difficult dilemma – don’t ask, “Why are you testing me God?” He may not have sent the test at all. Instead ask, “What are you teaching me God during this difficult time?”

More than likely, the lesson will be, “Am I willing to risk what I want and trust Him?” Am I willing to sacrifice, am I willing to give up, am I willing to let go, am I willing to surrender? Will I give up my grudge, my anger, my fear, my worry, my self-pity, my desires, even my rights and trust Him? If I am willing, He will help me do the right thing instead of the easy thing and I will grow closer to Him.

How do you know you can trust God? How did Abraham learn to trust? In the past, against all odds, the Lord always provided. He believes God will provide the lamb even before they get to the mountain. That day, God provided a ram, not a lamb. Two thousand years after Abraham, on a hilltop a half mile west of Abraham’s mountain, God provides the lamb. On a dark Friday, another Son is tied and placed on an altar of wood. His Father places Him there. But this time, the Son is not released from the wood. God submits to the most devastating test of all. The ultimate question is not “Can Abraham give up his son and trust God?” The real question is can God trust us? Can God offer us His Lamb, His Child, His only Son, Jesus, whom He loves and trust us? And the answer is a firm, flat, fatal NO! But He still does.

That’s grace. This is the God we get to know through this test: the God who provides Himself, who offers Himself, who substitutes Himself on the hard wood on the mountain. This is the God who is with us in every test we face, in every dilemma we deal with, in every mountain we climb.

You may have a long climb ahead of you. But you don’t have to walk it alone.