

WOULD YOU HAVE PASSED THE "ABRAHAM TEST?"



**Why did God make life so awfully hard?
for Abraham's family?
(and every family since)**

**May you have the hindsight to know where you have been;
And the foresight to know where you are going;
And insight to know when you have gone too far.
– An Irish Blessing**

Scripture:

Genesis 12

Go the place that I will show you

1. The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.
2. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
3. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."
4. So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.
5. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.
6. Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.
7. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

Genesis 22

"The Abraham Test"

1. Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.
2. 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."
3. 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.
4. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.
5. 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."
6. 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,
7. 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?"
8. Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

9. 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.
10. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.
11. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.
12. "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."
13. 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.
14. 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."



TO TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE LOVE OF THE LORD

- **Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.**
Proverbs 22:6 KJV
- **Teach a child to choose the right path, and when he is older he will remain upon it.**
Proverbs 22: 6 (Living Bible)

On the surface it would seem that we have a rather simple task today. We recognize the families with babes and children, and support them in the challenges of raising their families. We welcome newly baptized children into our community today, and we wrap our arms around the parents.

May you train up your child(ren) in the love of the Lord, so that he/she will not depart from it when he/she needs it later in life. You have not only a task of helping your child gather facts from teachers, but also providing a moral and spiritual context in which to give facts their interpretation.

OTHER CHURCH FAMILIES

From the families that are here today, it is only a short jump to our own families and their efforts and struggles – with children, grandchildren, and beyond. There have never been more opportunities, and more pitfalls for emerging families existing side by side in the history of civilization.

Young married couples search for their own spirits and identifies, while the definition of family is continually changing.

To the teachings and traditions of families, add the growing influence of peers who may have more effect on children than their parents.

Add to that something new: the internet (for better and for worse), and with that the publicity

machines that sensationalize not only the best but also the worst of our culture.

So we wonder, by whose standards is greatness judged, and we know that our answer will be judged by the government, the school district, the family of origin, the culture of origin, the military, the sports teams. Each would expect us to define greatness by their own standards.

Is it not fair that we also ask our children to understand and honor the life of Jesus Christ, whose rules for life were very different?

Dare we add the church to the list of those who raise our children? I hope so. May the maturity of our faith provide a stabilizing spiritual influence of balance, not blame, and guidance, not guilt.

When we see that the church and its representatives have let a family down, we feel doubly discouraged.

As a church, we look for the day in which our society can be truly multicultural. May it please the Lord, that our church does not exist to increase prejudice by selecting just one small pool of chromosomes, while rejecting all those that are not in that pool.

The struggle to be truly multicultural is as great a challenge for the church as it is for schools, countries, and the families of whom they are composed.

BOARD OF EDUCATION RECOGNITION

Today we honor the families in our church.

Today we recognize all families connected to our church.

But this week the Board of Education will make a presentation to the Church of the Roses for our

work with children whose families we don't even know. All we know about them is that they have one thing in common – they don't get a breakfast at home, and so they get one here.

Will the volunteers who help with the Montgomery breakfast please stand - that is anyone who is currently on our volunteer crew and anyone who has served at some other point over the seven year history of this program.

The Board of Education of Santa Rosa instructs you to be in attendance at the Board of Education meeting at 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday at their regular meeting room in the Santa Rosa City Hall Council Chambers, 100 Santa Rosa Avenue, pursuant to agenda item #C-6. Our breakfast program, and a program at the St. Luke Lutheran Church that was modeled after our program, will receive special recognition by the entire School Board for a seven year commitment to young people that has grown to seventy or more kids every morning who come to our church for breakfast. The Rev. Tom Nolen had a vision for us to be an active part of the nurture of families in our community. Initially, there were more volunteers than students. But that is not the way it is today, and the whole community is finding out about what we are doing. Roses, don't let me stand in front of the Board of Education alone – the last time that happened ... well let's not go there. I don't want to do this without you.

Join me, not only for our church, but to validate the kids that we feed. Wednesday, 6:00 p.m., in the City Council Chambers downtown.

THE BEGINNING OF THE BIBLE

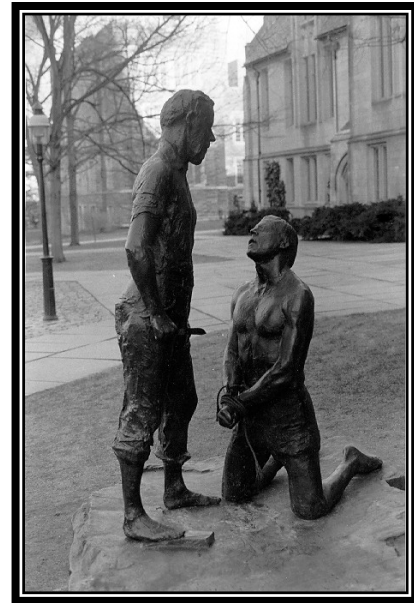
The Bible begins with eleven chapters about the creation of earth from waters, the storms upon the waters, the great flood, and the second creation of civilization through Noah. People and places are "idealized." But then the narrative changes and follows one family and one people. The story of Abraham's family begins the narrative of our faith, followed by the record of their son, Isaac, his son, Jacob, and his son, Joseph, and their families.

Our scripture lesson is the story of Abraham and his son. But when we look to this lesson for guidance about raising the next generation, we find a disturbing truth that is as true today as it was in the time of Abraham.

**Does our religion call us to sacrifice our children for the faith of their elders?
Sounds preposterous, doesn't it!**

KENT STATE, 1970

There is an effigy – an image – on a midwestern university campus of a man standing over his kneeling son, whose hands are bound with rope. They are bronze statues, but it is clear that the older man is wearing modern clothing with Levis and a short sleeved shirt. His son is in shorts and no shirt at all, which means that he is nearly naked. The father has a knife in his right hand that is pointed in the direction of his son, and the posture of the father is very threatening to the young boy. It is a modern depiction of our scripture lesson today.



But you need to know which university and when it was dedicated to understand how this story of Abraham and Isaac transcend time: The statue is in the courtyard of Kent State University in Ohio, dedicated in the early 1970's.

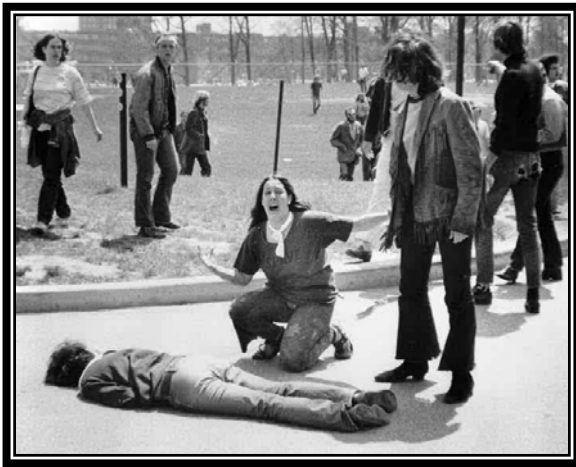
So when we match the location – Kent State – with the characters that the statues depict, Abraham and his son Isaac, this statue sends a strong message. This is a statement about fathers who are ready to sacrifice their sons for the sake of the father's religious and political ideas.

It was May of 1970. Some called it the Kent State shootings while others called it the Kent State massacre. Four Kent State students protesting the American invasion of Cambodia, and the War in Vietnam, were killed on campus by the Ohio

National Guard. Nine more were wounded by rifle fire. The shootings were the culmination of four days of increasingly agitated demonstrations by members of the student body following the televised announcement of the invasion by President Richard Nixon.

There were significant national consequences to the shootings; hundreds of universities, colleges, high schools, and even elementary schools closed throughout the United States due to a student strike of eight million students, and the event further divided the country along political lines.

This point was clearly illustrated when President Nixon attempted to justify the shootings with the statement, "This should serve as a grave reminder that when dissent turns to violence, it invites tragedy."



I remember it as if it were yesterday. But we should remember it as if it were today. A bronze statue depicting a father's readiness to sacrifice his son for the sake of the father's religious and political ideas.

CAN WE LEARN ANYTHING FROM THIS HERO OF LONG AGO?

God said to Abraham, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you." Are we still the heirs to that blessing – the leader in moral values, multiculturalism, and a light unto the world?

Abraham is the story of a transition in the life of a man, and it is also a story of a transition in human understanding of God. From God of many, to the God of one. From the man who was a nomad, to the man who founded cities, agriculture, communities, and brought his people to Biblical Israel, our story

begins. Abraham was the first. Once you have been first, it cannot be done for the first time again.

FIRST TIMES

There is a Hebrew prayer of "first times" that is one of my favorites. Arriving for the first time at the Mount of Olives we recite the words of a Hebrew blessing for "first times."

"Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has brought us to this time and to this place."

I hope once in a while you will give thanks for some of the "first times" in your life, and feel this way. The first person to know God, and build a family upon this faith, was Abraham.

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

At the climax of the Abraham story, Abraham was convinced by God to take this only son, this son whom he loved – the Bible spells it out twice with the same words so that we won't miss it – and led him to a hill where there was once a threshing floor. It was a flat rock terrace at the top of a hill where the wind would have helped separate the grain and the husks. The aged father is shown getting up in the morning and cutting wood, as he would for an animal sacrifice. Following God's instruction, he saddled a donkey and rode with Isaac for three days until he reached the threshing floor.

Leaving his servants to guard the donkey, father and son walked up the hill to the place of the sacrifice. Isaac carried the wood; Abraham brought the fire and a knife. Then his son asked aloud why they had not also brought a lamb with them. Abraham's answer is memorable and heartbreaking, "God will provide the lamb, my son."

Still without revealing his intentions, Abraham constructed an altar and piled the wood on it. Then he tied Isaac's limbs together, as he would have those of any other sacrificial animal and laid him on the pyre. Not until Abraham had grasped the knife and prepared to slay his own son, did God intervene. "Do not lay your hand upon the lad, or do anything with him," the Lord called out, "for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. (Genesis 22:12)

Nearby was a ram caught by the horns in a thicket. Abraham offered the ram as an acceptable sacrifice. And then God affirmed his promise that this chosen servant would be blessed, and would become the ancestor of children beyond number. This story stands by itself as an act of obedience and deliverance. We are relieved that it turned out the way it did, and Christians see in this story the foreshadowing of the sacrifice of God's only son, the son whom God loved, on the cross, as the fulfillment of all obedience. It is a connection that is just too difficult for Christians to overlook.

ISAAC:

But, what happens if we tell this story from the point of view of Isaac? This story becomes terrifying. How is it that I was born to a family that would be willing to kill me if they felt that they had a religious or political impulse to do so? (child sacrifice)

Thirty years ago people were asking what kind of fathers and mothers would permit their sons to be killed in a war in Southeast Asia. Today Isaac still lives among us, and so do his fears that sons and daughters might be sacrificed for the religion and the political ambitions of their parents.

SARAH:

And, what if we tell this story from the point of view of his mother, Sarah? She was witness to it all, and for her, Isaac was the son of her old age. What if it had been her religion, instead of her husband's? How would female leadership be different than male, and how would our history have been rewritten from the viewpoint of Sarah?

The Father; the mother; the child whom the father was ready to sacrifice: As you read the newspapers in the weeks to come, remember the first family of the Bible and consider each viewpoint when you read about Iraq, the Middle East, Asia, and multiculturalism in our own country. Consider these people when you hear the uncompromising voices of politicized Christian groups using the symbols of our own faith to promote a narrow agenda that defines faith according to three hot button issues (abortion, gender, and prayer in school).

THE BUTTERFLY

Why was Abraham's life so hard? Why does each of us struggle so hard? Why is it hard for

families to find enough money, to find the right friends, to honor their traditions while being meaningfully engaged in the present? Because struggle prepares us for life.

A man found a cocoon of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared. He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could, and it could go no further. So the man decided to help the butterfly. He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon.

The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time. Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.

What the man, in his kindness and haste, did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were God's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our lives. If God allowed us to go through our lives without any obstacles, it would cripple us. We would not be as strong as we could have been. We could never fly!

*I asked for Strength...
And God gave me Difficulties to make me strong.
I asked for Wisdom...
And God gave me Problems to solve.
I asked for Prosperity...
And God gave me Brain and Brawn to work.
I asked for Courage...
And God gave me Danger to overcome.
I asked for Love...
And God gave me troubled people to help.
I asked for Favors...
And God gave me Opportunities.*

Often we find that courage to fly in the stories that describe the best moments of our past.

Does Abraham have anything still to say to us? So long as men and women look to the skies and look inside themselves for the answers to the questions of “Who am I?” and “Where am I going?” we will continue to find the words we need in the pages of scripture; and we will find spiritual companions in those who have responded to God’s call across the boundaries of time and space.



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