

Close call: Genesis 22:1-14

by [Melinda Hinnens-Waldie](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

When I was a child, and again when I became a parent, this powerful story was abhorrent to me. In my youth I thought: God asked *what* of Abraham? Is this the God who I am supposed to worship? I was at the age when a child joyfully sings “Jesus Loves Me,” and God was demanding that Abraham do away with his precious son. I tried but could not imagine my parents, whom I adored, taking me into the unknown to sacrifice me to God.

As a parent, I read the passage with even wider eyes—imagine being asked to sacrifice your child, the beloved gift that you have waited for all of your life. How could I, or anyone, ever have such faith?

Today I am slowly coming to grips with Abraham’s overwhelming obedience to God’s request, but I know I still respond with many “yes, buts” as I continue my own faith journey. In the first sentence of the narration, we are told that God is going to test Abraham. The story is straightforward: God calls, Abraham answers and sets about to honor the demand that Isaac be sacrificed. The story is told with little emotion, but we may experience powerful emotions as we absorb the words. We may also come to understand this as an account of abundant faith. The outcome of the story will determine not only the life of a child, but also the future of a nation.

When God calls Abraham, Abraham answers God three times with “Here I am,” and he answers immediately. Robin Scroggs says that Abraham’s response is grounded in radical obedience. God gives Abraham the instructions to take his dear son and to present him as a burnt offering. Abraham and Isaac set out. The father cuts wood for the offering and finds the place for the sacrifice. He tells his entourage to wait. When they’re alone together, Isaac implores, “Father!” Abraham again answers, “Here I am, my son.” Isaac wonders where the lamb for the offering is. In the essence of faith, with utter trust and confidence, Abraham replies, “God will provide the offering, my son.” As Abraham takes up his knife, the angel of the Lord calls his name once more. When Abraham answers, “Here I am,” God understands the depth of his faith, and Isaac is spared.

Will Abraham trust and obey the Giver, or only adore the gift? This is the test question, says Walter Brueggemann. “At the beginning God is the tester; at the end, God is the provider.” Brueggemann also asks, “Can the same God who promises life also command death?” After all, to assert that “God provides” requires a faith as intense as does the conviction that God tests. And we are not allowed to choose between God’s testing and providing, between the command and the promise.

What a riveting narrative—if only we could leave it behind as “Old Testament theology.” But God goes even further by giving us another Son who is sacrificed so that we might believe. Jesus’ test is crucifixion; God’s providing is Jesus’ resurrection. Here is the answer to our horrified questions about Isaac’s sacrifice—our God does not demand such an offering from us, because it is already given by Christ’s death and new life. The lamb in the thicket is now the Pascal Lamb, and we are the recipients of eternal grace. The powerful story of Abraham and Isaac has led us into a deeper vision of the dynamics of faith.

Margaret Farley describes this belief:

Faith leads us through valleys of darkness and into the shadow of death. But all the while, it leads into life, and it knows the ways not only of sadness, but of joy. By it we are carried into God’s own life; in it we can find one another; through it we come home even to ourselves. Incredible work, radical surrender, unlimited future, inexhaustible life—these are not illusions . . . they do bear pondering . . . as aspects of the concept of faith—believing, believing in and believing into the God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

At the end of the film *Places in the Heart*, all of the characters present during the movie gather together in church, those living and those who have died. They are intermingled, with the killer sitting next to his victim, the white racist next to the black man he mistreated, all sitting in places where they would not have been during their lives. They partake of the Holy Supper. The bread and wine pass from one to another. Suddenly we know what faith is, even as we know we cannot explain it. In one powerful scene, we see what Christ accomplished for us on the cross. We see the Holy Spirit handing plate and cup to all of God’s children. This vision is Abraham’s legacy—one day, enfolded in God’s unconditional and steadfast love, we will live in harmony with our Lord, and thus with one another.

I believe the Abraham-Isaac scripture comes to us not only to demonstrate how very arduous it is to have true, abiding faith in God, but also to paint for us the magnificence of the Creator's grace in our lives. Father Abraham *is* Father and Mother God. Father Abraham, through Isaac's lineage, will become the Father of Jesus the Son, God Incarnate. Faith in this God will ultimately heal us and bring us to new, abundant life.