

## **"Abraham - A Journey of Faith!"**

**Genesis 12:10-20**  
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**Genesis 22:1-19**  
**St. James UCC**

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Someone once described faith as a laboratory course rather than a lecture course. The difference of course is whether you just hear about it or you experience it. Abraham's course on faith was clearly a laboratory course! He was challenged by God to live his faith - even in the most difficult circumstances imaginable.

As you might recall, Abraham was living quite contentedly with his family at Haran. It was there that God appeared to him and made a special promise - that he would be blessed and would be a blessing to others, and that Abraham would have many descendants, descendants who would become a great nation.

Now one of the amazing things about this promise is that Abraham was childless, and he was already 75 years old. While both Abraham and Sarah were to live well past the age of 100, 75 years old was still past the time when most people would anticipate having further children. In other words, logic said that it was unlikely that God's promise would be fulfilled.

The promise to Abraham is further threatened by a famine in Canaan, a famine that threatened Abraham's family with starvation. The solution was to go south to Egypt, but doing so raised a new fear, for Abraham was afraid that on seeing the beauty of his wife, the Egyptians would kill him, so that she would be available. We can only imagine the consternation that Abraham and Sarah must have felt when the Egyptian king became seriously interested in her. You can almost hear the frantic whispered conversations that they must have had, wondering what to do, what they could do that would not anger the king.

You see, Abraham got into trouble when he failed to trust in God. God made him a promise, and God didn't qualify the promise by saying, if you survive the famine, then I will do this. God clearly and unequivocally promised that the impossible would happen. Abraham would have a child, and his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. But Abraham got into trouble with his efforts to make that happen. He decided to flee the famine, to lie about his relationship with Sarah, and later on that since his wife was barren, that he should father a child with her serving maid, all because he did not really trust in God to fulfill the promise that had been made.

How like Abraham we are. We too fail to trust in God. We think that we need to make everything happen, as if God is helpless in the face of new developments in our lives. While at times it is difficult to tell whether or not an action on our part might be a failure to trust in God or taking advantage of an opportunity that God has offered us, when it comes to lying and other unloving actions, it's pretty clear that Abraham was not acting out of faith, as God had directed him to.

At the same time, I find great hope in this passage. Abraham, one of the great heroes of the Bible, the person that God chose to be the ancestor of Israel, and promised wondrous things to, this Abraham was like you and I. Sometimes he was very unwilling to trust in God, thinking that he had to make everything happen for himself. It didn't work for Abraham anymore than it does for us, but the hopeful part is that if Abraham could make that mistake, and still do what happens in our second text, then there is hope that we too can live out our faith in God, even though in the past we too have often failed to really trust in God.

The other message of hope in this story is that Abraham changed. There were several significant points along his journey that he utterly failed to trust in God, but he learned from those experiences. In his old age, he did have a son. At the age of 100 Sarah became pregnant, and bore their son Isaac, who was not only an unexpected blessing in their old age, but also the fulfillment of God's promise.

So it was that God put Abraham to one final test. Abraham was told to take his son Isaac, travel several days to a mountain, and there to offer Isaac as a sacrifice to God. With tears in his eyes, Abraham cut wood for the sacrifice, loaded a donkey, and took Isaac and two servants along. As they approached the mountain, they left the servants behind, and Isaac ends up carrying the wood with which he is to be sacrificed.

The knife and the hot coals that Abraham carried must have been burning into his very heart. This is his son, the son that he loves, not just for who he is as the fulfillment of God's promise. This is his son! This command that God made is impossible, but Abraham continues on determined that he will do whatever God demands, and that this time his faith in God will not falter.

Perhaps the most poignant moment in this story is when Abraham and Isaac are climbing the mountain, and Isaac asks his father, "I see that you have the coals and the wood, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham responds, "God himself will provide one." He doesn't know when or how or even if, but Abraham chooses to place his faith in God.

We can only imagine how difficult it must have been to climb that mountain and build the altar. When all is ready, Abraham ties up Isaac, and places him on the altar. There, knife in hand, he raises his arm ready to kill Isaac, dashing all of his hopes and dreams and sacrificing the one he loves, all in order to fulfill God's command.

The rest, as they say, is history. At the last minute God calls to Abraham and sends a ram to be used as the sacrifice. God never wanted Abraham to kill Isaac. This was but a test to see if Abraham was finally ready to follow God totally and completely, even when that path led him in very threatening directions.

Stop and really think about that for the moment. You see there is no special merit in following God when it's easy, and that path takes us in the direction that we want to go anyway. We would have done exactly the same thing whether God wanted us to or not.

On the other hand, when following God leads us in difficult and challenging directions, that's when it is hard. When following God means doing things that don't seem to be logical or rewarding and isn't what we would do on our own, then it becomes a real test of faith, and as someone once said, "when faithfulness is the most difficult, it is the most rewarding".

You see, we're all ready to follow God when God is leading us down a pathway filled with great rewards and blessings. We're all ready to follow God when we get what we want. Abraham was one of the heroes of the Bible because he learned to follow God even when that meant walking on very dark and difficult pathways, even when it meant doing something that was the last thing in the world that he would ever want to do. Abraham learned to trust in God no matter what.

That was the challenge of faith for Abraham, and that is the challenge of faith that comes to each of us as well. I understand that most of us haven't been down to Egypt lately and we haven't been asked by God to sacrifice our son on a mountain. At the same time we have each been challenged to live a life of faith in which we follow God's commands. We've been challenged to do that in a society and a world that often pushes us in other directions, for many people are more concerned about what they can get out of life than how they can live faithfully.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, Abraham was challenged by God to live out his faith, even in the most difficult circumstances imaginable. In his ability to stand up to that test, Abraham has become a model of faith for us to follow, and also a bearer of God's challenge, for through Abraham we too are challenged to do the same. For God has offered each one of us the gift of faith, and then challenges us to live it out each and every day of our lives!

Amen.