

You would hear the announcer "This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System... This is only a test." You would hear those words, and then the TV screen would show an Emergency Broadcast Logo, and the TV would make an extended beeping sound.

But one night in the late 70's, my brother and I were watching some vampire movie on the late-late show, and the beep and the Emergency Broadcast logo came on the screen. But the announcer hadn't said anything. It was just the tone and the logo out of nowhere. It was still during the Cold War. I thought, "Is this it? Have the Soviets fired their nukes at us?"

Well, after a minute or so, the voice of the announcer came on: "This has been a test of the Emergency Broadcast System." Well, I wish they'd said so up front--that minute would have been much less terrifying. It would have been nice to know it "was only a test."

In our OT lesson today, Abraham is severely tested. We know it's a test right up front. But he doesn't. And he's asked to do a terrifying thing--to sacrifice his son.

Genesis 22 is one of the toughest chapters to deal with in the Bible. In fact, it's downright shocking. The binding and attempted sacrifice of Isaac. It's a story that led both Mark Twain and Immanuel Kant to reject traditional Christianity.

Thank goodness we didn't read in on Father's Day two weeks ago. It seems to be a horrible example of fatherhood. Kill your son to make God happy? That God would ask that, or that Abraham would go through with it make us question them both. Both Abraham and God appear to be abusive fathers at best, and downright psychotic at worst.

Since it is so tough, I do want to spend a little time with it this morning.

Two weeks ago, we heard about the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, even though they were both very old. God promised that through Isaac Abraham and Sarah would have many, many descendants.

Last week, we heard of how God chose Isaac, rather than his half-brother Ishmael, to be the line through which his promises would come.

Which brings us to a very strange turn of events in ch22. We're told up front at the beginning of the chapter that God is doing this to test Abraham. But it seems like a psychotic test.

God commands Abraham: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering."

As a parent, it's hard to imagine anything more incomprehensible and terrible. Take your child. Cut his throat. And burn up his body as an offering to God. It's just horrible.

This is a threat not only to Isaac's life. This is also a threat to all of God's promises to Abraham. God promised Abraham to give him descendants greater in number than the stars in

the sky. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would give birth to Isaac, even in their old age. God promised that the covenant would be through the descendants of Isaac rather than through Ishmael. But now God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

The stakes are very high. The birth of Isaac when Abraham and Sarah were in their 90's was a miracle. But now, if Isaac is sacrificed, the chances of Abraham having any descendants will end too. The call from God to Abraham threatens not only the life of Isaac, the son. It also threatens Abraham's relationship with God, and all the promises God ever made to Abraham.

So the real questions for Abraham in Genesis 22 are, "Who do you trust? What do you value? What's more important, your son, or your relationship with God?" In a very real way, Abraham is being asked to decide what comes first in his life: dreams of future glory, his son, or God.

Well, Abraham apparently chooses God. Abraham sets out with Isaac and some servants for a three-day trip. When they get there, Abraham and his son leave the rest of the entourage behind and head up the mountain.

And in one of the most touching statements in the account, we're told that Isaac himself carries the wood for the sacrifice. Abraham himself carries the fire and the knife. This is so poignant. Abraham is being an overprotective father, carrying the dangerous objects himself so his son isn't injured. And yet he's going to have to turn around and use those dangerous objects to sacrifice his son.

And then there's a heartrending exchange between Isaac and Abraham:
"Father! The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"
"God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Does Isaac suspect something? Does Abraham hope against hope that there will be a lamb to substitute for his son? We don't know. Back a few verses earlier he did say "the boy and I" will go, and "we will come back." Maybe that's an indicator of faith. Maybe Abraham is just grasping desperately at straws.

In any event, when they get to the top of the mountain, the pace picks up. There is a rapid succession of active verbs here:

"Abraham **built** an altar there and **laid** the wood in order. He **bound** his son Isaac, and **laid** him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham **reached** out his hand and **took** the knife to kill his son."

But then, when the suspense is at its peak, God stops Abraham and says, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

This has been a test of Abraham's faithfulness, and Abraham passes with flying colors. Abraham places God above all else. Abraham trusts God above all else. He said earlier,

"God will provide the lamb." And sure enough, God does provide the lamb. And so, Abraham names the place, "The LORD will provide."

Abraham trusts in God in the most extreme scenario imaginable. He says that God will provide, and God does.

We live in very different circumstances. We live lives of comfort and convenience. Disaster and tragedy are unpleasant surprises, not things we expect. Thus we often live our lives on auto pilot, expecting things to continue on they way they have been.

And our spiritual lives are often on auto-pilot as well. If we live largely comfortable lives, we don't need much from God. In fact, we'd probably prefer most of the time that God not ask much of us. We expect God to keep us comfortable, and then to be waiting in the wings to help us through any unexpected bumps in the road.

Abraham had no such illusions. He knew that he lived in a crazy and barbaric age. Abraham learned throughout his life that he needed more than a safe, warm-fuzzy god. He needed a real God. Abraham knew that a bland wimpy god who made no demands on his life was no god at all. The real God might seem incomprehensible at times. His will might be hard to understand. He might not seem safe. But he was always good.

It was a risky thing to follow this God. It led Abraham along a journey he would never have expected. Following God led Abraham to leave his comfortable home to live the rest of his life in a desert tent. Following God led Abraham from a childless existence to fatherhood with all of its joys and pains. Following God led Abraham up the mountain with knife and fire while his son Isaac carried the wood of the sacrifice. But we shouldn't be surprised at this.

After all, this same God commanded another Son to climb another mountain, one just 1,500 yards away from this first one, carrying the wood on his back for another sacrifice. This time it wasn't a bundle of wood for a fire. It was a wooden beam of a cross. And unlike Abraham's son, God would NOT intervene to stop the sacrifice of his own Son.

God did not stop the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Instead, God allowed him to die for the sake of the whole world. God provides his own Lamb. God sacrificed his own Son to death so that we might have life.

On this mountain, the Lord will provide.

God is not always safe. But God is always good. He has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And he asks us to do what Abraham did. To trust and have faith.

What do we do when following God seems risky? What do we do when God's will seems incomprehensible? The best thing to do is to do what Abraham did. Trust in the living God.