

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
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Faith to Follow

“This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life. This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.”

Those words remind us of the great victory that we celebrate at Easter. They remind us that Christ is risen, and that Sin and Death and Hell are defeated. But we must always remember to view Easter Sunday and the resurrection from the perspective of Good Friday and the cross, just as we must always view Good Friday from the perspective of Easter. Jesus’ passion and death on the cross are unpleasant to remember and difficult sometimes for us to reconcile our minds to, but they are part of the story of salvation that we celebrate at Easter, and so we cannot forget them. The fact is that the Bible is full of difficult stories. We may focus on the ark and the animals when we tell children the story of the flood, but the reality of the story is that God decided to wipe out all life on earth except a chosen few whom he preserved in the ark. We may focus on the miraculous parting of the Red Sea when we tell the story in vacation Bible school, but we can’t gloss over the way the sea returned to drown the Egyptian army as they pursued the Israelites. And there is no way to make the story about Abraham and his *near* sacrifice of Isaac into a kid-friendly bedtime story. The fact is that the Holy Scriptures get an “R” rating, for graphic violence, adult content, sexual situations, nudity, and the frequent use of alcohol. We may prefer to skip over the difficult stuff. We may attempt to clean it up in how we tell it or where we place the emphasis. But still, those stories are there. Their details are what they are. We can’t escape them. We must deal with them on their own terms.

Take Abraham and Isaac. The story of Abraham begins with a call and a promise. God called Abraham, back when he was still called Abram, and told him to leave his home and everything that was familiar to him and go to a place that God would show him. Abraham didn't question God. He didn't hesitate. He went, just as he had been told to do. God did then show him the land that would one day be his descendants'. The promise then comes in the form of a covenant. God promises to make of Abraham a great nation, with people like the stars of heaven or the sands of the sea, beyond counting. Abraham doesn't question it. He trusts that God will deliver on the promise even though he and Sarah, his wife, were getting old. They do have a weak moment and Abraham fathers a son to Sarah's maid. But God reconfirms that they will have their own child. Finally, when Abraham is 100 years old, Sarah has a baby. They named him Isaac which means, "she laughed," because that was Sarah's reaction when the angel told her she would have a baby.

So you can imagine how important this son is to Abraham and Sarah. They love him, as any parent would love their child, but for them this child is the fulfillment of a divine promise and a miracle in their old age, and more than that, he is the only way God can fulfill his promise to make of Abraham a great nation. In the Scriptures, children are seen as a blessing. Isaac is a very rare blessing for a couple who have faithfully waited their whole lives to receive him. So you can see what a dilemma it is for Abraham when God tells him to take his son, his only (legitimate) son, and offer him as a sacrifice and a burnt offering to God. This was the greatest test of Abraham's faith. How could God keep his promise if Abraham killed his only son? Would God give him and Sarah another child? Why would God require such an extreme display of obedience after all that Abraham had done to prove his faith? It was a ridiculous request from God. Why would Abraham listen and obey God? Why indeed?

The reason is simple: because God had never steered Abraham wrong. Every time God made some crazy promise to Abraham, or asked some ridiculous thing of him, God always came through. So really, the question is: why *wouldn't* Abraham do as God asked of him?

I know that when we apply our modern minds to this story it is troubling on many levels. I'm asking you though to take it simply on its own terms. The Bible tells us that God was testing Abraham. That's the first problem, isn't it? We don't like to think of God as testing people, or deliberately putting stumbling blocks in front of us to see how we handle them. Still, that's what the text says, so let's just take it at its word. It's a test from God.

Secondly, the idea of sacrifice, even animal sacrifice, is abhorrent to our modern sensibilities. Okay, fine. But this was not 2017, it was at a time when gods demanded sacrifice as part of their worship. That was not an unusual thing. Abraham would have normally offered an animal sacrifice as his worship of God. So let's just accept that as part of the norm at the time.

Now the real difficulty comes in what it is that God demands Abraham to sacrifice—his son, his only son (he repeats, to emphasize the extravagance of his demand). Again we bristle at this. We would rather not think about worshiping a God who behaves in this way. But remember, the narrator has told us that God was testing Abraham. We, the audience, know that God has no intention of letting Abraham go through with it. Of course, Abraham doesn't know that. So why would this loving father who is so thankful to have a son finally in his old age agree to sacrifice his son?

Abraham believes God. He trusts God. He fully expects God to deliver on his promises, including Abraham's legacy which all hinges on Isaac's survival. So when Abraham is asked to do something, even though he has no idea how it could possibly work out well for him or his

family, he agrees. What were his options? He could have refused. But that would have broken faith with God. He could have done the noble, or heroic, thing and sacrificed himself instead of his son. Maybe we could respect that, but it was not what God asked him to do. God asked for his son, the most precious thing in the world to him. So that's what Abraham would give him, trusting that God would somehow work it out, that God somehow—and he had no idea how—would still fulfill his promise to Abraham. That's faith. That's trust. To proceed even when the path ahead is invisible to us. To follow even when there is no earthly possibility of success. The only way forward for Abraham was for God to make something happen. He had to trust that God would be true, and good, and merciful. And God was.

God intervened at the last moment and stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. He even provided an acceptable sacrifice right there in the middle of the wilderness, the ram with its horns caught in a thicket. Can you imagine? Can you imagine the weight Abraham bore as he placed the wood for the burnt offering upon his son's back? Can you imagine the piercing in his heart when his young son asked, "Father, where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Can you imagine binding your own son, placing him on the altar of sacrifice, on top of the wood, and raising the knife in your hand to do as God had told you? Can you imagine the relief when God said, "Don't do it! I know now that you love and fear me.?" What a test! What a gut-wrenching, heart-breaking test of Abraham's faith!

I know that you may hate this story. I hate this story. Think of the implications for people doing crazy things and claiming that God told them to do it. But we must remember that in the end it all turned out alright. God kept his promise to Abraham, just as Abraham knew he would. God did not really require that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. Abraham's faith in God was

rewarded. Even though Abraham couldn't see the path ahead, God guided him along the right way.

We may want to throw out the difficult parts of the Bible, but we can't. We shouldn't. I'd love to throw out the whole passion and crucifixion. I'd love to re-write that one, but I can't. The fact that God was willing to do what he refused to expect from Abraham, and offer his own Son as a sacrifice for Sin, is absolutely astounding to me. The fact that Jesus had the kind of trust in God that Abraham displayed, but had it to a much greater degree because it was his own life on the line, always humbles me. The fact that God was able to turn this horrible event, the death of Jesus on the cross, into the very opposite of what it seemed to be, will always be a mystery to me. We thought it was the end of life, but it was the end of death. We thought it was defeat, but it was victory. We thought it was the triumph of darkness over light, but the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

We cannot forget the cross, even as we proclaim the resurrection. It's all part of the story of our redemption and salvation. It's all part of the Good News. We can't skip over the unpleasant parts. We can't ignore them, or try to pretty them up. But we can learn from them. Learn the lesson of faith and trust. Learn the lesson of walking the path that may only be revealed one step at a time. Learn to accept God's love in the way that God chooses to reveal it.

We are Easter people, but we are also people of the cross. Being connected to Christ through baptism means that we are bound to him, bound both to his death *and* his resurrection. We die to self. We die to sin. We die to all that holds us back from following where Christ leads us. And we are alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let the cross remind us of the cost of our freedom in Christ. Let the cross remind us of the cost of our own discipleship. Most of all let the cross

remind us of the victory that we have through our Lord Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead on the third day so we too may be raised to life eternal.

Amen.