

## What Kind of God?

Andrew Young, former ambassador to the United Nations and member of the U.S. House of Representatives, contemplated the decision of his daughter to do mission work in a dangerous part of Africa. Young mused: “When we brought her to church and Sunday school, we didn’t know she was going to take all of this religion so seriously! It’s sort of scary to realize that you are putting your own child at risk when you bring her before the Lord.”

*Do we place our children at risk when we bring them to God? That’s just one of many questions posed by this Genesis account of Abraham and Isaac. Surely this is one of the most troubling and perplexing stories in all of sacred Scripture. It seems to ask more questions than it answers.*

Because when God calls Abraham, and Abraham answers, “Here I am,” God issues a strange and severe command. *Take your beloved only son, Isaac. Take him up on a mountain. And kill him. And offer him to me.* When we hear this mandate, we remember that Isaac is the child given to Abraham and Sarah in

their old age. Isaac is the child on whom God's promise rests. Isaac is the child of blessing. Isaac is Abraham's child.

The author doesn't give us many details about the relationship between these two. But the words they exchange suggest a father-son bond of great tenderness. Now that bond is in jeopardy and along with it, the promise to make of Abraham—and Isaac—a great nation.

But how will the next generation receive the blessing? For God has commanded that Abraham, by his own hand, take the life of the son he loves.

Just what kind of God *is* this? Sometimes, just when we think we have our God all figured out, the Bible has a way of letting us know that we don't! The transcendent One who created the heavens and the earth also created our human minds. But we have trouble wrapping our minds around the fact that this God we believe we know would make such a demand of Abraham. That this God would make such a demand of *anyone*.

Anyone who has ever had a child or loved a child or lost a child empathizes today with Abraham and with the heart-wrenching pain he must have felt at hearing God's command to sacrifice his child.

In some of the polytheistic cultures of the ancient Near East, people believed that their gods—that’s “gods” with a lowercase “g”—required the sacrifice of children. But although child sacrifice was not uncommon in the idolatrous nations surrounding Israel, it sounds particularly repugnant to our twenty-first century ears. Even though *this* society routinely offers its young to lesser gods: the gods of materialism, beauty, and sexuality; the gods of technology, controlled substances, and celebrity. Even though this culture, under the guise of “entertainment,” desensitizes its citizens to ever-increasing violence.

Still, a God who commands such a horrific act of aged Abraham really doesn’t sound like the God we worship and serve. We wonder: what kind of God demands the life of an only son? Then we remember—just last Sunday in Matthew’s Gospel—hearing Jesus insist: *Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me*. Could this be a God who claims first place in our lives, above even that of our children?

Is this the kind of God who orders Abraham to slaughter his son? In the face of this demand, Abraham leads Isaac up the mountainside. And when the boy asks, *Father, the fire and the*

*wood are here, but where's the lamb for the offering?*, Abraham replies, *God will provide the lamb for the offering, my son.*

You know, it's tempting to assume that Abraham is being intentionally evasive here. That he's shielding his son from an unspeakable truth. But that's just not so. No deception is involved. Abraham tells the boy exactly what Abraham believes will happen in the future: that God will spare Isaac. And that's all the more astonishing when we consider what *we* know and Abraham does *not* know. We've been told right up front that God is testing Abraham.

Have you ever felt that God was testing *you*? Has there been a season of your life when circumstances seemed overwhelming? When you fell into deep despair? When you believed that God had hidden God's face from you? When you felt that God was trying to see how much you could take?

What kind of God tested Abraham and may let you be tested as well?

This God who tested Abraham is a God who takes risks. With Abraham, the stakes couldn't be higher. For God has promised Abraham that through him and his son Isaac, a covenant people will come into being and be God's own.

But the author wants us to understand that God does not know for certain how Abraham will respond to this test. God does not know in advance whether Abraham will choose to offer or not offer his child to God. Abraham's faithfulness is not pre-arranged or forced. God gives Abraham—and God gives you and me—freedom to choose. With Abraham, God risks God's plans, God's purposes, and the future of God's people. Because Abraham does not withhold his only son from God, the promise through Isaac will be fulfilled.

At the place of sacrifice, Abraham binds his son and lays him on an altar. You've heard this narrative before. Its climax may have already seared its way into your consciousness. The terrible glint of the blade. The terror flashing in the boy's dark eyes. Frightening images that resonate in all whose lives have been touched by violence.

It's a disturbing scene. And one of its take-aways, in the words of Terrence Fretheim, is that "receiving promises does not entail being protected from moments when those promises seem to be called into question." Is there a part of us that, in such moments, wants to turn away from God?

What kind of God is this? A God we doubt? Or a God we trust? Genesis tells us that Abraham has walked with God. He has left his home and his country to travel to a land God has promised to show him. Abraham has trusted. And out of trust flows obedience. Abraham's trust is revealed in obedience. Even when it appears that in Isaac, God will take away all that has been promised, Abraham, spiritual father of us all, trusts. And obeys God.

What kind of God is this? This is a God who is good and gracious and worthy of our trust and our obedience. Even when it seems impossible that the promises will be fulfilled. Even when the journey is long and uphill all the way. Even when others are skeptical as to the eventual outcome, we—like Abraham—witness with our words and with our deeds to the kind of God we worship and serve. The kind of God in whose steadfast love we trust.

This story of Abraham and his son inspires you and me. It gives us courage and strength to walk in obedience. Even when the tasks seem insurmountable. Even when it feels as though life is closing in on us from all sides and there is no way out. Even

when we wonder: What kind of God is this who seems to be putting more on us than we can bear?

Hmmm. As a pastor, I've heard more than a few believers say that "God doesn't put on us more than we can bear." That's an interesting saying. But it's one that nuances the words of Scripture a bit. So I thought you'd like to know what the Bible actually teaches. Paul assures the Corinthians that: *God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*

What kind of God is this? This is a God who provides a way out. This God, as the psalmist sings, deals bountifully with you and me. On the mountain, at the very moment when the knife is poised in Abraham's hand, God's messenger calls him to stop. Isaac, child of promise, will live—because of Abraham's willingness to give what is most precious to him back to the One who gave him that gift in the first place.

And God says: *Now I know. At last, I know.*

At this exact moment, Abraham looks up. And sees that his own prophecy to Isaac has been fulfilled. God has provided a ram. God has provided a way out.

What kind of God is this? This is a God who is faithful. This is a God who provides a way out of the sin-sickness that has damaged the human condition ever since the first disobedience in the garden. This is the God who loves you and me enough to give an offering that will bring us back to God. And for that offering, provides not a ram, but a Lamb.

For this account of Abraham and his son takes place on a mountain in a land known at that time as Moriah. And it's been suggested that this place where the wood for the offering was laid on Isaac could have been the very place where the wood for another offering is put on the back of another young man. Another promised One. Another beloved only Son, who carries it uphill to the place of sacrifice. To the place where he will face death.

But on Calvary's mountain, no angel commands the executioners to stop. The nails are driven into place. The wooden cross is hoisted. And the Lamb provided by God breathes his last.

What kind of God is this? What kind of God is this who does what God never asked anyone else to do—not even Abraham? What kind of God is this who spares Abraham's only



son, but offers up *God's* only Son? And today offers us his body and his blood, filling us with him and sustaining us in him? What kind of God is this who is determined to go to any lengths for us and will stop at nothing to claim us?

My brothers and sisters, this is the kind of God in whose saving love our hearts rejoice. For this is the God who *so loves the world that God gave God's only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

This is the God who called Abraham. This is the God who calls *you*. And this is the God who desires that you too will answer, "Here I am."

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.