

“Fear Seeking Faith”
June 28, 2026
Scripture: Psalm 13; Genesis 22:1-14

That story is about the most disturbing one in Genesis, and possibly in the entire Bible. I say that not just because I find it that way, but because it has been debated and interpreted for millennia by scholars and theologians and preachers without any satisfying understanding. The most common interpretation I’ve heard is this story about Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac is a way to denounce the practice of human sacrifice. So, when God stops Abraham from murdering Isaac and provides a ram instead, we’re supposed to learn that God prefers animal sacrifices to human sacrifice.

That theory only makes sense, though, if offering Isaac as a sacrifice had been Abraham’s idea to begin with. But we know it’s not. Abraham wasn’t considering doing that; it never crossed his mind. God commands him to do it. We’re told that God is testing Abraham, but I don’t think that makes God look any better, really. It’s an odd thing to test at this juncture. After all these years of Abraham going along with God, leaving his home country behind and hanging onto the promise of progeny, even when the prospect of having a child became more and more remote, why wait until now to test him? Hasn’t Abraham already proven himself to be faithful and compliant?

And what effect does this experience have on Isaac? Does he leave Moriah with the feeling that his life could be forfeit at any moment depending on God’s whim? That’s a heavy burden to be saddled with. And for what it’s worth, Abraham and Isaac don’t interact again. Even though Abraham will arrange for a wife to be found for Isaac, he doesn’t do that with Isaac; he just sends a servant out to find her. Maybe all that’s immaterial and can be chalked up to the concerns of the biblical writers. But stories don’t come from nowhere. They’re told and passed down for a reason. And it’s always worth asking why a story in the Bible is told the way we have it and not differently.

So, why would the people putting these stories together hang onto this one about Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac? I think one key to understanding that lies in the words from Psalm 13. We often imagine that faith as it’s portrayed in the Bible is a straight path that moves ever upward, from strength to strength. But many of the psalms reveal a more complicated story. The psalms give voice not just to praise and thanksgiving. They also give voice to frustration and disappointment and even anger. Underlying many of the psalms is a fear that we all share from time to time. Everything we have, all that we’ve accomplished, can be taken away in the blink of an eye. Many people are just one or two paychecks away from homelessness. A test result from the doctor can change the course of our lives dramatically. How many parents lie awake at night worrying about their kids and the direction their lives are going or regretting something said in anger or frustration they wish they could take back?

For the people of Israel who lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and were carried away from their homes into exile, the possibility of losing everything defined their world. The question they asked over and over was “How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever? How long

will you hide your face from me?...Look at me! Answer me, Lord my God!” Living with that depth of disappointment and loss leaves a mark on us coloring everything we do. It creates a lens through which we see the world as precarious and hostile. For generations they will live with the constant fear that what they once thought was solid and certain could be pulled out from under them in an instant.

How do people live with that kind of fear? One way is to simply blurt it out like we find in many of the psalms. Through the art of lament we’re given permission to express our disappointments and fears openly to God. Another way to process that fear is to tell stories about it. This story about God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son whom he loves may be a way to talk about the trauma of having everything taken away and the fear of it happening again.

As the people of Israel languished in exile, as they mourned the loss of their homes and their sacred city, how could they help but ask, “Why?” How could help but wonder how they would get through it and what would become of them if they couldn’t. There’s probably not a person in this room who can’t relate to those feelings at least at some level. We’ve all been through loss, if not of someone we love then of a hope or expectation that’s been dashed. We’ve all been in a place where we’ve wondered if we’d ever get through it. Where do you go for assurance? Where do you look when you need a handle to grab hold of and give you some confidence?

I’m a big believer, and maybe I’ve said this before, I’m a big believer that we should take the Bible seriously, but not altogether literally. I think many stories in the Bible are meant to give us a frame of reference for our circumstances rather than historical data. And when people are living in fear the frame of reference they need to find is faith. Ancient stories, like this one about Abraham and Isaac, are meant to help a people mired in fear about their future to find faith to move forward. Did these things actually happen in the way they’re told? It really doesn’t matter. What matters is we know what it’s like suddenly to have the rug pulled out from under you and see your prospects for the future ripped away. We aren’t given any insight into Abraham’s interior life in this story, but surely when he received that command from God his blood ran cold.

When God wanted to lay waste to Sodom, Abraham intervened and argued for those who were worthy that God might save the city for as few as ten. Yet here, when God requires something so devastating of Abraham, not a word of protest. But so often that’s how it is for us. Things happen over which we have no control and nothing we say or do can change them. The most we can hope for is to move into those circumstances because there’s no way to avoid them and trust that we’ll find what we need to endure them. For Israel in exile, suffering an ordeal they couldn’t prevent or change, many must have wondered how they could go on. This story offers them a handle, a thin reed maybe, but at least something to cling to: *There was a time when Father Abraham was faced with a loss so deep he couldn’t even muster the strength to question it. But he trusted that in spite of what God demanded of him, God would provide a way through it. And God did not abandon him. God will not abandon us. We, too, can trust in God’s provision. We are not alone.*

Stories have great power to shape us. Think about your own families and the stories you've been told about your ancestors, the hardships and joys they went through. Those stories have helped make you who you are. They've provided you with a perspective on your life that you can draw on when times are hard or you're feeling fearful. That's how faith is formed in us. The stories we've been told, whether they're accurate or not, give us a foundation on which we build our lives. So, we don't have to get stuck just lamenting. Even the psalmist, whose words might resonate in you, doesn't end in bitterness or despair: "But I have trusted in your faithful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. Yes, I will sing to the Lord because he has been good to me."

In our fear we seek faith, not nihilism or despair. We seek a way to go on, to move forward and to sing.

*Sometimes a light surprises the child of God who sings;
It is the Lord who rises with healing in his wings;
When comforts are declining, he grants the soul again
A season of clear shining to cheer it after rain.*

That's our next hymn. It's written by William Cowper, an 18th century poet and hymn writer. Cowper lived a difficult life. His mother died when he was very young, giving birth to his younger brother. As an adult he suffered with severe depression which led to attempts to take his own life. He was confined to an asylum for several years. He found solace in his faith, even though he continued to battle bouts of depression. His friendship with John Newton, who wrote the hymn Amazing Grace, led him to advocate for the abolition of slavery in England. One of his more famous poems is "Light Shining Out of Darkness," that popularized the line, "God moves in a mysterious way/ His wonders to perform."

In thinking about this hard to accept and even harder to understand story about Abraham nearly sacrificing his son Isaac, I've struggled to find a hymn that can capture the movement from fear to faith. Cowper's does that for me, especially knowing what his own life was like. It goes on:

In holy contemplation we sweetly then pursue
The theme of God's salvation and find it ever new;
Set free from present sorrows, we cheerfully can say,
"Let the unknown tomorrows bring with it what it may."

It can bring with it nothing but he will bear us through;
Who gives the lilies clothing will clothe his people, too;
Beneath the spreading heavens no creature but is fed;
And he who feeds the ravens will give his children bread.

Though vine nor fig tree neither their longed-for fruit should bear,
Though all the fields should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there,
Yet God the same abiding, his praise shall tune my voice;
For while in him confiding, I cannot but rejoice.

Our stories of faith are meant to help us move through times of trauma and fear. And sometimes even the most disturbing stories can offer us guidance and the promise of hope. Take them seriously, even if not literally, and we can find what's needed to lead us to a deeper faith so we "cannot but rejoice."

Amen