

Let Scripture interpret itself

It's a way into even the most difficult story



Whenever we focus on a particular passage of Scripture and expect it to answer, within itself, all the questions it raises in our minds, we're asking too much.

We all know the story: The Lord God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac, whom he dearly loves, up onto a certain mountain and there sacrifice him (Genesis 22:1-14).

What? How could our loving God ask his faithful follower Abraham to do such a thing? And how could Abraham do it?

You won't hear this story in our lectionary readings this year. But we're exploring it because it's perhaps the toughest of all the texts in our three-year lectionary series. Lutheran theo-

logian Joseph Sittler called it the most difficult passage in the Old Testament—and probably in the whole Bible.

What can we do when we run up against such a troubling text? As Lutherans, we interpret it in the light of texts that are more readily understandable, remembering to interpret all of Scripture in the light of the Bible's main themes.

When we read Genesis with this understanding, we notice that after God begins working with Abraham, God puts him through 10 tests, promising him four astounding blessings: a land; a son—though he's nearly 100; a great nation to come from him; and a blessing to come, through him, to all nations. Let's check out the 10 tests:

1. Leave your homeland (Genesis 12:1-3).
2. Settle in the new land (12:4-9).
3. Divide the land with Lot (13:5-18).
4. Wait for the son I've promised you (15:1-6).
5. Make the covenant of halves (15:7-21).
6. Change your name from Abram and Sarah's name from Sarai (17:1-8, 15-16).
7. Be circumcised with your family (17:9-14).
8. Again, wait for the son I promised you (17:19).
9. Intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah (18:17-33).
10. Bind Isaac (22:1-14).

So we see that God leads Abraham through the tests—each a little more difficult, each helping Abraham develop more trust. In the earlier

ones, Abraham keeps questioning God, saying, in effect: "How will I know that you're really going to give me a son in my extreme old age?" (15:2-3). And, "How will I know that you're really going to give me this new land?" (15:8).

But when he reaches the 10th test, Abraham doesn't let loose a barrage of questions as he did when he learned that God was planning to destroy Sodom (18:23-33). Nor does he laugh as he did when God told him that he would have a son the following year (17:17).

By the time of the last and most difficult test, Abraham is able to trust that the One who already has fulfilled the first two promises—of a land and a son—can be counted on to fulfill the other two amazing promises as well.

So as they're walking up the mountain and Isaac says, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (22:7), Abraham can answer, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (22:8).

Whenever we focus on a particular passage of Scripture and expect it to answer, within itself, all the questions it raises in our minds, we're asking too much. We need to ask the Spirit to guide us, then look not only at its particular setting but also at the witness of the whole Bible, remembering what the Scriptures teach.

God always does what's best for us. But God does allow difficult things to come into our lives to spur us to grow. God longs to develop a relationship with us and wants us to develop into people with a strong and deep faith. God intends for us to become useful, capable people who can help others.

The Scriptures show us that God, rather than expecting us to give up our children, gives up Jesus for us. We must square all we read in Scripture with a God who does that. □

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