

This risky thing called "faith".



Once or twice a year in my dreams I relive doing my final exams at high school. I feel the pressure again, the pressure not to let my wonderful teachers down, or my parents who believe in me. But something always goes wrong in those dreams: I cannot find the classroom, or I cannot remember the right time and show up after everyone has already left. And that's when the dream turns into a nightmare: not the nightmare of failing my

tests, but the nightmare of failing those who trusted me.

Our passage from the Hebrew Scriptures is also about a test; not a written exam, but a test of trust, for Abraham. Now the very first time we meet Abraham he is 75 years old, and is told by God to leave everything behind and to go on a journey to a place he had never been. For us nowadays that would be hard enough as it is, even with instant communication, cars, and planes we have now, and all kinds of organizations who will help you out. But for Abraham, so long ago, it was simply unthinkable. People just didn't move like that, especially older people who had no children. For older people, leaving everything behind was almost suicide. All their lives they had worked hard to build up enough to live off in their old age; so the last thing you did is pack up and go and start all over again.

On top of that, God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation. Problem is, Abraham is 75 years old, Sarah 65, and they have no children. Sarah is barren and they had long ago gotten used to it. There wasn't anything that could be done about it; this was the end of story.

Enter: God. God who upends it all with two crazy promises: a new land and enough descendants to become an entire nation. They wait a few years, and they wait a few more years - and when nothing happens they try to help God along by having Abraham father a child, Ishmael, with one of his slave women, Hagar. It may not be the perfect situation, but they are at peace with it.

But then, against all hope, against all odds and against all expectations: a son is born! They call him Isaac; Abraham is 100 years old, and Sarah over 90.

As God and Abraham are getting to know each other in the Genesis stories, it is becoming clear that God has big plans for Abraham. But... is Abraham ready for it? Because it won't be easy. So once Isaac is born and everything seems to be heading for a happily-ever-after storybook ending - God says, "just wait a moment; we aren't done yet", and puts Abraham to the most horrible test a parent could ever get.

This is, on the surface, an awful story. What kind of God would demand the life of a child, of any child? At face value, this test seems barbaric to us, and confusing and backwards.

So again: what kind of cruel god would do *that*?! Truth is, a lot of them! Notice that when God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham does not argue, he doesn't protest, he doesn't even ask why. He just gets to it.

Now how would *you* react if a voice told you to sacrifice your child? I'm pretty sure you would not accept that; you'd probably refuse, and you'd want to know why. And yet, Abraham goes along with it like it is a normal thing. Why? Because in that culture and that time, it *was* a normal thing. All the religions of the world surrounding him believed in child sacrifice as a way to make the gods happy and take away their anger. The bigger the sacrifice, the happier the gods. So when this particular God tells Abraham to do the same, he wouldn't be too surprised. After all, he witnessed this happen all around him. Nothing different about this God.

And yet, this God is radically different from those other gods. Because as Abraham goes to fulfill what was so normal in the world at the time, God stops him from doing so. It's like yanking the needle off the record in the middle of a familiar song to get our attention. God uses a familiar story here to teach an unfamiliar new truth in the most striking and powerful way possible: child sacrifice is not needed to have a good relationship with God. It's enough to trust.

Can you imagine the ride back home, Isaac sitting next to his dad on the cart in an awkward silence, occasionally talking about the weather maybe, but never mentioning that, you know, earlier that day Abraham was tying his son down to an altar with a big knife in his hand... What kind of God would play with a man's emotions like that? What kind of God would terrorize a child in such a way?

There are no easy answers to these questions. In fact, they are the wrong questions because that's not what this story is about. This story is about the very real risks that are involved with being in partnership with the God of the Covenant. The very real risks that are involved in "trust". Because that's the whole thing with trust, isn't it? It's fragile; It can so easily be broken and abused, it doesn't take much at all. *All* relationships are built on trust: between parents, between siblings, between friends and neighbours, between us here at Pinegrove, and most of all: between us... and God, between God and us.

You see, Isaac was not just any child; he was the special child of a special promise. Abraham and Sarah were so old, there was no reason for them anymore to have any hope of a child. So Isaac's arrival was clearly God at work, God who gives new life where we have given up a long time ago. Yet God demanded of Abraham the ultimate sacrifice - not to terrorize him, but to have him experience how difficult and how risky trust is.

Of course there is the silly story told about the man who was out walking and fell off of a cliff. On the way down he manages to grasp a branch that grows out of the side of the cliff. There, hanging between life and death, and knowing that there's no one around for miles, he calls out to God. "God, are you there?!".

"Yes, I am here, my child", a voice answers.

"Save me!"

"Do you trust me?", the voice asks.

"Yes, of course I trust you. Save me, please!"

"Do you *really* trust me?"

"Yes I really trust you! Now save me, please!"

"If you really trust me," the voice says, "I want you to do one thing."

"Yes, anything! Anything!"

"Anything? If you really trust me, just let go"

The man thinks for a moment and then yells out, "Is there anyone *e*/se up there...?!"

For Abraham there wasn't anyone else, and as hard as it might have been. He took a huge risk, he had to let go. There was no way for him to know it would work out okay, there were no guarantees, no safety net, just... this trust, uncertain as it was.

Last week, at the joint worship and picnic in St. Paul's, I talked to a number of people from the other United Churches in our area. And without exception, they all told me about the challenges they are facing, just like us at Pinegrove. No one I talked to said, "We're doing just fine, there's not a cloud in the sky".

Our faith is being tested, just like Abraham's faith was tested. In fact, faith is *a*lways being tested; and Pinegrove is no exception. We have to decide what is getting our real attention: the God of the Covenant who created the heavens and the earth - or our budget? Are we paralyzed by a deficit and dwindling numbers - or do we see where God is creating new life and abundance?

Pinegrove already often is a place of abundance and unexpected moments of grace and joy. Not only in the big things, like the Green Thumb Tea or the Fall Supper, but also - and I think *especially* - in small moments of support and deep connection between people. God is present when we can laugh at ourselves, but also when we earnestly listen those who need support and care. God is present in the gentle touch of a hand, or a big hearty bear hug, or a caring phone call. God is present when someone has the courage to say "I'm sorry I hurt you the other day" and when the response is "And I forgive you". God is present whenever we are community in Christ's name, making room for all.

Yes, it is important to have a budget that is in the black, but ultimately that is not what we are called to do. Ultimately we are called to trust God, risky as it may seem because there is no safety net; we cannot save ourselves, there's "no one else up there". We have to let go. But when we have the courage to do that, suddenly we'll find things are working out somehow. And we'll find ourselves *sharing* that experience. And we'll find that *others* are trusting us, wanting to be part of it, whatever "it" is, joining us on this risky thing we call "faith". Amen.