

Abraham and Isaac—I can't even imagine! I mean, now that I'm a father of a two year old boy, I just don't want to think about it! Waking up one day and saying to my little guy, "Hey buddy, you wanna go with Daddy on a hike? We're gonna spend the day together, climb a mountain—just you and me!" And all the while, knowing full-well what the day will bring. It's gut-wrenching just talking about it.

I've got to hand it to Abraham though. I mean, as if God asking him to sacrifice his son wasn't bad enough—even crazier was the fact that God promised Abraham a son in Isaac. And Abraham waited and waited for God to keep that promise—and when he was 100 years old, Isaac was finally born. God said that it would be from this boy that Abraham would live up to his name and become the father of many nations—he'd have so many decedents, in fact, they'd be more numerous than the sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky. And not only that, but Isaac's family tree would branch out to include the Savior of the world. So, when God asks Abraham to offer up his son, his only son, it's like God telling Abraham that He was scrapping this whole plan of salvation altogether.

With that in mind, I can almost hear Abraham's heart ache as he's climbing up the mountain. What questions he must have had—My God, a God who calls Himself Father, wants me to sacrifice a child? My God, a God who keeps His word, is breaking it by taking away my promised heir? But worst of all—My God, a God who saves, has changed His mind about saving me and the rest of humanity? It's difficult to process how Abraham could still trust God through all this.

Yet, Abraham made it into Hebrews 11, what has become known as the "great faith chapter." While he might not have understood quite what God was up to, he still trusted God to come through in the end. In that passage, we're told that "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could even raise him from the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death." If nothing else, Abraham believed God would still keep His promise by at least resurrecting Isaac. Which might explain why Abraham tells his servants before they go up the mountain that the two of them—he and the boy—would both be back soon. Why else would he say that if Isaac was for sure a goner?

But instead of just listening to Abraham's aching heart, let's put up an ear to Isaac's chest. Too often, he gets overlooked in this story. Maybe it's because we assume he's just some naive, innocent, doe-eyed child, who has no idea what's going on. But the Bible has convinced me otherwise. For example, I don't care how young or how trusting, no kid's gonna just let their daddy tie them up and make a roast out of them. No man over 100 could stop Isaac from crying for help and running for his life.

Another thing, Isaac does eventually connect the dots when he says, "Hey Pop, I see the fire and the wood, but where's the sacrificial lamb?" Well, in our English translation, Abraham tells him, "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son"—which sounds like he's simply addressing Isaac, his son. But if we were to look at the Hebrew, we'd see the actual sentence construction and hear it much differently—Abraham specifies that the burnt offering God is providing is none other than "my son." A better translation is, "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering—*my son.*"

But maybe most striking are the two bookends to this story. Before today's Old Testament reading, it's the story of Abraham and Abimelech which says that "Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines." Nobody knows exactly how long that was, but "many days" implies that a lot of time passed between Isaac's birth and the sacrifice of Isaac. Then, after today's Old Testament reading is the story of Sarah's death. Now, she died when she was 127 years old, which is 37 years after Isaac was born. If Isaac's just a little squirt in today's reading, it seems kinda funny that the Bible would just jump another thirty years later to his mother's death. This might make sense why when Abraham calls him a "boy," he uses a Hebrew noun which could also be translated as "young man." It might also explain how Isaac could be strong enough to carry up all that firewood.

The point in all this is, Abraham's not the only one going through a testing of faith. But just think of poor Isaac, having to wrestle with such questions of his own. Nevertheless, willingly, obediently, trustingly, he allows himself to be the sacrifice. I almost wonder which would demand more faith in God, Abraham's sacrifice of his son or Isaac's sacrifice of himself?

Will Willimon, a professor at Duke Divinity School, spent a few years in the early 80s as the pastor of a small church in Greenville, SC. During his time there, he wanted to show his congregation a dramatization of this very Bible story. Afterward, his plan was to have his wife, Patsy, lead the children through a learning activity related to the story, while Willimon would discuss the meaning of the story with the adults. At first, Patsy had some misgivings about showing such a strange, powerful tale to the children. But "It's only a little Bible story," Willimon insisted. "What harm can there be in it?"

So, the group watched silently as the story unfolded. Abraham was played perfectly by some Israeli actor. And the fact that the dialogue was in Hebrew with English subtitles only added authenticity to the film. There was old Abraham, struggling up a windswept, dusty mountain—Moriah—with a knife under his coat and his son trudging along quietly behind him. Finally, the bronze blade was raised, the boy's black eyes flashed with horror, and then a voice stops the knife in midair, and a ram cries out from a thicket—then it was all over.

Stopping the projector, Willimon split up the group in half by age, and then the learning began—for *him*, that is. His wife asked the children, "Who knows what the word 'sacrifice' means?" A few hands shot up, and attempts were made at a definition. "But what does sacrifice mean to *you*?" Patsy continued. And that's when the trouble started.

"My Daddy and Mommy are doctors," said one third grader. "They help sick people get better. Every day they do operations to help people."

"And how is that a sacrifice?" Patsy asked. But, the little girl wasn't finished yet.

"And I go to the day care center after school," she said. "Sometimes on Saturdays too. Mommy and Daddy want to take me home, but they are busy helping sick people—so lots of times I stay at the center. Sometimes on Sunday mornings we have pancakes, though." And everyone, from age 6-11, nodded in understanding—they knew.

"But what does this old story mean to *us*?" Willimon pressed. "Does this ancient story have any significance for us?"

"God still asks us to sacrifice," an older woman interrupted, her hands twitching nervously. "He still does."

"How?" he asked.

Quietly she said, "We sent our son to college. He got an engineering degree, and he got involved in a church. He married a girl from there, and they had a baby—our only grandchild. But now he says God wants him to be a missionary and go to Lebanon. Take our baby, too." She began to sob.

Again, the silence was broken—someone else was crying now. A young woman whom Willimon had never met—a new member of the congregation. The woman sitting next to her put her arm around her—"Gloria wanted me to tell you that her husband left her and the two children last week. She wants us to pray for her."

"What on earth was all that about?" Willimon found himself wondering. And he learned that when you start talking about people and sacrifices, things start getting pretty messy and pretty dicey pretty quick.

Maybe it's because none of us is any stranger to sacrifices. We find God making some pretty peculiar requests of us, and we all know what that's like. I'm sure you can still remember . . . when your life changed in an instant . . . when you got the news . . . when you found yourself at a sort of crossroads—your way or God's way. God knows you've made some sacrifices over the years—we could probably all go around and share our stories. Or maybe you know what it's like not to just make a sacrifice, but like Isaac, to actually *be* the sacrifice yourself. And if we had a stethoscope, what kinds of questions would we hear your heart asking? When God permits you to lose what means most, lets you get stripped of

what matters—your health, your loves, your job, your plans—it’s enough to leave you wondering just what kinda God is this?

Well, just after World War II, a German pastor named Gunther Rutenborn wrote a play called *The Sign of Jonas*, which attempted to answer that very question. The play takes place during a trial, seeking out who’s to blame for the crimes committed during Nazi Germany. Charges are brought against Hitler himself. Others blamed the manufacturers of munitions for profiting from the war. Yet others pointed fingers at the cowardly German people who refused to stand up to the Nazis. Ultimately, a man gets up in the audience and says, “You know who’s to blame? God. After all, isn’t He the one who created this awful world? Wasn’t it Him who gave them the power to do such evil? And He just sat back and allowed it to happen, didn’t He?”

So then God gets put on trial for the crime of creating the kind of world where such terrible things could happen. And quickly, God’s found guilty and is sentenced. The judge declares that because of the enormity of God’s crime, His punishment will be the worst possible—“I hereby sentence the Creator God to have to come and live in this world under the same anguish and loss that everyone else has to.”

The judge charges three angels—Gabriel, Raphael, and Michael—to carry out the sentence. Gabriel walks to one end of the stage and stands there brooding. After a while, he says, “When God has to serve, I want Him to see what it’s like to be an obscure, enchained human being. He’ll be born in the middle of nowhere and grow up in a country occupied by foreign forces, a Jew in a Jew-hating world.”

Then Raphael walks to the other end of the stage. He says, “When God has to serve His sentence, I’m going to see to it that He knows what it’s like to be frustrated and insecure. He’ll know what it’s like to be a refugee with no place to lay His head. His plans won’t be fulfilled. No one will understand Him. And He’ll go to His grave a failure, not sure He’s accomplished anything.”

Lastly, Michael goes to the middle of the stage. “I’m going to see to it that He knows what it’s like to suffer in every conceivable way. He’ll be rejected and know what that’s like. He’ll suffer and know pain. He’ll be spat upon, tormented, and ridiculed, only to die a slow, torturous death as a common criminal.”

And with that, the lights go out—the audience sits expectantly in the dark and quiet—until finally it dawns on everyone: God has already served this sentence.

500 years ago, Katy, the wife of Martin Luther was listening to her husband read the story of Abraham and Isaac. And when he got to the end, she asked him, “How could a loving God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son?”

“Why Katy,” Martin said, “He did it Himself.”

Maybe we can reword that familiar verse—“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son on a silver platter.” See, on another mountain called Calvary, Jesus obediently carried up the wood for His own sacrifice. In Gethsemane, we can hear the anguish of His heart. Jesus knew there’d be no ram caught in a thicket for Him—but He trusted anyway. If nothing else, God was able even to raise Him from the dead.

Don’t you see—in the midst of any and every sacrifice, whether we’re the one raising the knife or you and I are waiting to feel the plunge of the blade, God provides our lamb of sacrifice, His Son! And thanks to Jesus, there’s already a ram in the thicket for you and me. Whatever you’re going through, whatever you will go through—there’s always a ram waiting for you there in the thicket. You might have questions, your heart might ache, but because of Jesus, God comes through every time. With your life and your salvation—He is God’s promise to you fulfilled.

It had felt like an uphill climb together. As her pastor, I'd seen her through the treatments and the procedures. But now, as her organs were all shutting down one-by-one, I knew this might be my last visit with her. We sang hymns, read Scripture, and prayed together—reminded of the promises of God. Since she was near death, I didn't know how I'd find her—but I could tell her heart had aches.

"How're you doing?" I asked. She looked up and smiled at me—an expression that in spite of any questions she might have, she also had a peace that surpassed all understanding. My eyes were then drawn to a card sitting on the table beside her. I looked at the card and then at her and back to the card again. On the front it said these unforgettable, familiar words from today's story—"The Lord will provide," it said. "Trust in Him." And in that moment, I learned what she already knew—just like Abraham, one way or another, she could trust God. Her lamb was in the thicket.