

Lent 1—February 18, 2024

Text: Genesis 22:1-18

Theme: A test for which you cannot study

For those of you who have not been part of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod for a long time, you may be unaware of what is often called “The Walkout.” If you want to learn more about this part of our history, the whole Lutheran Witness Magazine this month is dedicated to it as this is the 50th anniversary of that event. It was a very unpleasant time in the LCMS. Liberalism had crept in through the seminary in St. Louis, and it nearly unhinged our church body. When the dust had settled, the seminary at St. Louis instituted the Theological Interview. The T.I., as it was called, was an oral defense of your theology against 3 faculty members. If one did not pass the T.I., one could still graduate with a Masters in Divinity, but one would not be eligible for a call in the office of the Holy Ministry. To ensure that liberal pastors did not get placed in our congregations, they had to pass the Theological Interview. As a student, the frustrating thing was that it was not a test for which one could study. The only control the student had was an invitation to choose one of the three faculty interviewers. The interviewers could ask any theological question extrapolated from any of the coursework that the seminary required. It was a nerve-wracking test.

Abraham faced a similar test. See, what most seminary students did not understand and what Abraham came to understand, is that the most difficult tests are the ones designed to cause you to test yourself. God was not wondering if I could pass the T.I. He knew from the start that I would do fine and that He would call me to serve as a pastor in His Church which I have done now for nearly 34 years. God also was not wondering about Abraham's faith. He fully knew that Abraham would step up and do whatever he was commanded to do. But, like any soon to be pastor, back in 1989, I was unsure of my intellectual and theological abilities. Would I be able to manage all the data I had read and heard for four years of undergraduate work and four years of graduate work? Would I be able to synthesize the data and communicate it in some intelligible way to three professors who made me tremble just being in the same room with them? Turns out, I was fine. The Lord was with me and I breezed right through the interview. Like me, Abraham was unsure of how powerful his faith was. Would he be able to do whatever God called him to do no matter what?

God does test us. It is not a test for which one can study except to faithfully read His Word and receive His body and blood. That is all one can do. The test is not to see IF you are worthy and able. The test is to prove to YOU that you ARE worthy and able. We

are not people who are very motivated to spiritually test ourselves. We will tend to just coast and hope that everything will work out alright.

When I was in high school, my band instructor, who was a former trumpet player, would yell at the trumpets when they cracked a note because they were unsure of what they were doing. He would yell in his thick Alabama drawl, "For heaven's sake son! Don't blow and just hope!" He wanted the trumpet players to be certain of what they were going to play. He would have preferred them to play the wrong note with confidence than to crack a note because they were uncertain. I think too many Christians "blow and just hope." That is why God tests us.

He tests us so that we can see the power He has given us and live with that kind of confidence. He tests us so that we can learn that He is always with us and live our lives with the security that nothing can be done to us outside His will. He tests us so that we can get rid of dross in our lives and keep that which is pure and holy. He tests us to make us more faithful, more powerful, more concentrated Christians. He does the same thing to His Church. He tests us so that we, as His bride, can learn all of which we are capable. If He didn't test us, we would be fat and lazy and never stretch ourselves. That is just the way of sinful human beings.

Our Old Testament reading today is a particularly scary test. As Abraham raised that knife to sacrifice his one and only son, Jesus Christ himself stopped him. We know that this was an Old Testament appearance of Jesus because He swears by himself. The text says,

“And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD.’”
Only God can swear by Himself so this angel of the Lord is Jesus. Jesus stops Abraham from ending the line that would lead to His own incarnation. Jesus himself mirrored the very crown of thorns He would wear for all of us on the cross when He catches a ram to be the substitutionary sacrifice by the thorns of a thicket. As the ram was substituted for Isaac so would Jesus be substituted for all of us. The test was over. Abraham learned how powerful his faith was and saw that God would never leave his side no matter what.

What test are you taking right now? We face tests every day. Some are huge and some are small but they are all to show us how powerful our faith is. Look for the ram in your life. Listen for the voice of Jesus spoken to you through His Word. Learn what He is teaching you because nothing you ever endure is in vain. God always has a purpose for every lesson He teaches us and it is always for our good. When a difficult test comes, our choice is to sit and cry in our beer or to look for the lesson and grow in our faith.