

Ah, a sunny summer afternoon and the living is easy. We’ve got it made in the shade; something nice and cold to drink, a comfortable chair and a good book to read. We turn on the radio to listen to the ball game. Maybe one of the 4 aces will throw a no-hitter! It’s summer time and the living is easy.

Before we can settle in, the sounds of summer are disrupted by an obnoxious screeching, squawking, static-y sound that sets our teeth on edge: “This is a test of the emergency broadcast system. This is only a test. If this were a real emergency, you would be notified where to go and what to do. This is only a test.”

Wouldn’t it be nice if life came with that kind of alert? “Don’t worry. This is just a test. If this were a real emergency, you would be notified where to go and what to do. This is only a test.”

Abraham would have appreciated that kind of warning; Isaac as well. We know from the beginning that God is “testing” Abraham. We know the story so we know that God isn’t really asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, is he? This isn’t a matter of life and death; “This is only a test.”

Then our easy lives become un-easy. Will we be able to make ends meet? Will our loved one come through the crisis in their life? The doctor ordered some tests, and we await the results. “This is only a test?” No, this is much more. This is serious. The outcome is in doubt. Will we pass the test?

✦ “TAKE THE TEST TOGETHER”

Last week, Janice, the boys and I, went back to Pleasantville to visit an elder in my former church who was near death. He died last Wednesday. Talking with his soon-to-be widow, she recounted how she could not have kept going without the support she’s received from her church.

Here at Pennside, a week has not gone by during the past several months, where a phone call or visit didn’t include a person being tested (and there are many of us) saying, “I don’t know what I’d do without the support of my church family.”

We stand on holy ground when we stand with one another in the midst of the test, and we encounter the Holy One in the midst of the test. The test reveals that God is at work. God is peeling away the crust of sin that conceals the saint within.

God is doing that with Abraham and with Isaac ... and what about the two servants who go along on the trip? They see the preparation. They can put two and two together; human sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of a child was a Canaanite religious practice. A holy silence surrounds this community as they travel those 3 days towards Moriah; the mountain where it will be seen. Nothing is said, at least nothing worth remembering, but the servants keep serving. They go on the pilgrimage to an unknown land at the command of a God they thought they knew; but now they do not understand.

Some of us this morning are taking the test. Abraham and Isaac are among us, and you are not alone! We are your servants. We provide the support and encouragement that helps you keep going one more step, one more day, until you get to Moriah. We stand with you in the silence. We listen to the question we cannot answer. We bear the confusion and the doubt with you when faith meets a God we did not know.

Abraham and Isaac, you are not alone! We are your servants. We take the test together!

✦ TESTED BEYOND REASON

God calls, “Abraham.”

Abraham replies, “Here am I.”

Genesis 22:2 (NRSV) “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”

Abraham doesn’t reply. He’s speechless. The one who negotiated so eloquently and artfully on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah says nothing. The command has taken his breath away; he’s being tested beyond reason.

Night falls. He doesn’t sleep well, if at all. In the morning, he’s still in shock. He saddles the donkey. Then he summons his servants and Isaac. Then he cuts the wood for the sacrifice. Wouldn’t it make more sense to have the servants cut the wood, then saddle the donkey (and load it) and then summon Isaac?

Abraham isn’t thinking clearly. He’s being tested beyond reason. The God who promised him a future is taking his future away? The God who gave life when life was impossible is now dealing in death? It doesn’t make sense; he’s being tested beyond reason.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

God doesn't always make sense. *Isaiah 55:8 (NRSV) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.*² God tests us beyond reason; he invites us to take our relationship with him to another level. The limits of what makes sense to us are our limits, but there is more to God than our limited reason can conceive. It's one thing to trust God when we know what we're getting ourselves into. We're still in the outer limits of our comfort zone because we at least know what's going on. We're trusting God, and we're also trusting ourselves; we can ace that test because we already have the answer sheet!

St. John of the Cross called sleepless nights like the one Abraham spent between God's call and his departure, “the dark night of the soul.” God takes away from us the things we trust in instead of God. We trust in what God has given us; God takes it away. We trust in the gifts God has given us; they depart. We trust in a God we've figured out. We have this Christian thing down pat. God calls our name. Night falls. Sleep departs. *Psalms 13:1-2 (NRSV) “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?”*² *How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?*³

We're tested beyond reason, but we are not tested beyond God! This is the gift of “the dark night of the soul.” This is what the test reveals. We know God in a deeper way. We see God with greater clarity. We've discovered the grace that allows us to pass the test.

Think for a moment about the great Christians you know; the people that you read about or meet, and you say to yourself, “I wish I had faith like they do.” Get a little closer to them. Read a little more, and you will discover that these saints have been tested beyond reason. What sets them apart; what their example invites us to practice; what Abraham models for us as he staggers around his camp preparing for the longest trip of his life is this: When tested beyond reason, trust beyond reason. Trust in the God you do not understand. Trust that there is more to God than you know. In the mystery of God's “inscrutable providence,” your prayer will be answered. “How long, O Lord?” Just a little bit longer, just a little bit farther, then you will see. Trust in me, and you will pass the test.

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one such Christian who was tested beyond reason. A gifted Christian thinker and pastor, he participated in the plot to kill Hitler. He was arrested by the Gestapo and ended up in the Flossenburg Concentration Camp, where he was executed. During his imprisonment, he wrote the following prayer:

O God, early in the morning I cry to you.
Help me to pray
And to concentrate my thoughts on you:
I cannot do this alone.
In me there is darkness,
But with you there is light;
I am lonely, but you do not leave me;
I am feeble in heart, but with you there is help;
I am restless, but with you there is peace.
In me there is bitterness, but with you patience;
I do not understand your ways, but you know the way for me...

Restore me to liberty,
And enable me so to live now
That I may answer before you and before humanity.
Lord, whatever this day may bring,
Your name be praised.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁴

When God tests us beyond reason, take the test together. Trust beyond reason, and we will discover the grace to pass the test. Amen.

⁴ June 23, 2011. <http://www.hospicenet.org/html/read6.html>