May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love; go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." And so it happened that "Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son."

What a terrifying moment for Abraham and Isaac! And what wrenching drama for those over the centuries who have affirmed Abraham as a model of righteousness for all who believe! In rabbinic teaching, in the writings of Paul and the Letter to the Hebrews, in centuries of Christian theology, Abraham is celebrated as a paragon of faith. Yet in Genesis 22, God commands something ethically repellent, morally inexcusable, an atrocity that would have been as abhorrent to Jews in antiquity as it would be to us today: God commands that Abraham kill his son Isaac and burn his body as an offering.[1] And Abraham hastens to obey. Without a murmur of protest.

How can this be the same God who created life itself, who called Israel to be a blessing to all the families of the earth, Gen 12:3 the God who promised that Abraham's descendants through Isaac would be numerous as the stars of heaven?[2] And Abraham: icon of righteousness, 15:6 lauded by Paul as the "ancestor of all who believe," Rom 4:11 yet willing to betray his son savagely in the repellent practice of human sacrifice: what kind of spiritual ancestor is he?

Interpreters have argued about this story for over two millennia. Most of them lionize Abraham as the model of faith, but a significant minority are appalled at him. The polyphony of the conversation is spiritually formative. Engaging Genesis 22, we see more clearly what we do believe about God and what we decline to believe; we see which readings open space for new insight and which kinds of reasoning make us balk; and we become deeply curious about the roles of ambiguity, irony, and paradox in biblical storytelling.

Of course, some positions are just not plausible. I take as my illustration something from Friday's *New York Times*: "FEMA official who claimed he once teleported to a Waffle House has gone on leave."[3] Some arguments about Genesis 22 are like this. You have me convinced when you're talking about how delicious waffles are (*agreed*), and how you should let butter melt in the nooks and crannies of the waffles (*obviously*), and how fun it is to meet family and friends at the Waffle House (*absolutely*). But when you say you got to the Waffle House by teleportation, I have to draw the line. Biblical interpretation can be like that.

So let's dive into Genesis 22 as you consider the question of what it means to trust the Holy One "whose eyes are open to all the ways of mortals," Jer 34:19 the God "in whom we live and move and have our being" Acts 17:24–28 —and as you ponder the ancillary question of whether you should go to a waffle house for lunch today. Now, the answer to the second question is simple: you certainly should go to a waffle

house for lunch, though it has to be just a place that serves waffles, since the closest trademarked Waffle House is 161 miles away. I've solved that one for you—you're welcome—so you can focus on the trickier question of what Genesis 22 teaches about being faithful to the Most High God.[4]

A quick review of some perspectives on our story will show you the vitality of the conversation. 1) First, some say the binding of Isaac teaches that believers must yield to divine commands no matter what. God is sovereign (*of course*), and it is sinful to refuse a directive from God, no matter how appalling it might be. Some emphasize that this was "only" a test, and Abraham passes by having been willing to slaughter his son; our focus should be neither on the wrenching emotions a parent would have felt, nor on the intensity of the ethical dilemma, but simply on the fact of Abraham's pragmatic obedience to divine authority.[5] Some scholars reach for ancient Near Eastern comparative studies here: in antiquity, hyperbolic submissiveness was expected of a vassal, a subordinate, in a covenant relationship, so that's all this is: Abraham signaling he's a good vassal.[6] Nope. The story is powerfully "fraught with background," in the phrase of one famous interpreter,[7] and there are gaps galore in the "vassal" analogy. To say Genesis 22 is just "Abraham proving his loyalty" is where I draw the line. That would be teleporting to the Waffle House—though I am open to the possibility that our story is ironizing an *unthinking* vassal posture.

Some philosophers and evangelical theologians argue that God is more powerful than our limited ideas of morality (*agreed*). They say we don't get to critique religious traditions, which reliably tell us precisely what God wants. (*Nope*—teleporting to the Waffle House on that one, as centuries of rabbinic dialogue and Christian theologizing demonstrate).

Conversely, thinkers from Immanuel Kant to Martin Buber to Elie Wiesel have argued in different ways that what God commands cannot contravene moral law, so an ethically repugnant command must be resisted. The command to slaughter your child is not right, so it cannot be God speaking, or God's purpose must be other than what we assume.[8] Now, resistance is beautiful and holy. To me as a feminist biblical scholar, those waffles are delicious! But the position is just not persuasive that the biblical God never commands something unethical. In the Hebrew Scriptures, brutal punishments are leveled by God against entire enemy nations and also thousands of Israelites. Some biblical ideologies definitely present God as gleefully executing grievous harm, including slaughter, mutilation, and traumatizing bereavement, on entire communities. The God of Scripture cannot command anything immoral? That's a step too far: teleporting to the Waffle House. We must resist, because the biblical God does command unethical things sometimes.

Thus how we read Scripture is crucial. And how storytelling works is essential! Dramatic literary art engenders responses other than unthinking compliance. The

more we study Scripture, the more we feel the weight of missed opportunities, the more we admire subtle allusions and hear the thunder of the unspoken in the silences of the text. Attending to the polyphony of interpretation we realize that discerning what is ethical, moral, and godly is the work of believers—that's the work, faithfully to affirm and wrestle with Scripture and religious tradition, for the love of God and neighbor!

So here's one place where we feel the weight of a missed opportunity and hear the thunder of the unspoken. Abraham himself had argued at length with God on behalf of theoretical righteous people in Sodom when God was about to destroy that city. Before Isaac was born, Abraham had pleaded with God that if even 50 righteous people were there, Sodom should not be obliterated; if even 45, 40, 30, 20—Abraham argued God down: if even ten righteous people live in Sodom, it should not be destroyed. God yielded each time, teaching Abraham that resistance can be both faithful and effective![9] Yet not a word from Abraham, not a murmur, years later when he is commanded to slaughter his beloved son. We are meant to wonder about that![10] Unthinking obedience to divine brutality is not the point of the test God is administering.

The binding of Isaac shows us how deeply theology and ethics are entangled as we learn faithfulness over time. Stories form us. Narrative tension and suspense, ambiguity and elegant structuring all matter for how stories mean and for who we become as we experience them. The horror we feel at the divine command to kill

Isaac instructs us. The alacrity with which Abraham obeys God's command stuns us, propelling us into prayer and ethical resistance and more Scripture study as we search for ways to resolve this dilemma. Beautiful doublets in the story teach us that things can appear one way, but look different as we become wiser.

Quick example. Abraham looks up and sees the mountain far away.

And he tells Isaac, "God will provide."

Later, Abraham looks up and sees the ram.

And he calls the place, "The LORD will provide."

When Abraham looks up the first time, the mountain looms as a place of impending atrocity. He says the right thing, "God will provide the lamb," but he means Isaac, and our blood runs cold. When Abraham looks up the second time and sees, the LORD has provided an actual lamb up close. Abraham understands better now; Abraham has learned. He said the right thing before, but he had not understood that God is a God of compassion; he should not have submitted to the cruel divine command. "Now I know that you fear God," the angel says. Many interpreters have heard that as commendation, because they need Abraham to be a paragon of virtue. Sometimes he is.[11] But other times he isn't at all: remember Genesis 12 and 20, when he gave his wife Sarah into the harem of foreign rulers twice out of fear? What the angel says here can also land as, "Now I know that you are afraid of God, but that's *all* you've shown me." Abraham taught Isaac not faith but fear. Did you know that after this episode, a new name for God comes into Scripture? After this,

God is known as פַּחַד יִצְחָק, "The Dread of Isaac." Gen 31:42, 53 I submit—and I'm far from the only one who thinks this —that Abraham "passed" the test only on a flawed reading of immature theology from a distance. He failed the test up close, ethically, when he put the blade to his son's throat. He needs to keep learning—maybe starting with Hosea 6, where God says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Hos 6:6; Matt 9:13; 12:7

The binding of Isaac calls us to discernment. To obedience, yes, trusting that God will provide. But even when we are trying to be faithful, we repeatedly fail to understand who God is and who we are meant to be. We have to keep learning theology and ethics, in every experience, every moment of the life of faith.

May it be so, for the sake of the One whose grace is always sufficient for us 2 Cor 12:9: Jesus Christ, to whom be honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

28 June 2026

Proper 8A

Genesis 22:1–14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12–23; Matthew 10:40–42

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

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[1] I find notably weak the position articulated by some interpreters that the wrenching ethical dilemma is not in the foreground of this brilliant story. Anyone tempted to read the story on the faulty assumption that if emotions are not narrated,

they must not have mattered to the ancient author, and who thus fails to account for the sharpness of the ethical dilemma and the heightened narrative suspense here, along with rich aspects of characterization in the presentation of Abraham over the complex arc of ancestral traditions in Genesis, would benefit from consulting the work of biblical literary theorists, reception history experts, and scholars of affect theory. They might start with Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, revised and updated (Basic Books, 2011), then consult more recent studies of ancient Hebrew narratology.

[2] The theological stakes are extremely high, and the dilemma is unresolvable. Søren Kierkegaard, writing as Johannes de Silentio in the Exordium of *Fear and Trembling*, offers these observations: "Abraham climbed Mount Moriah, but Isaac did not understand him. Then Abraham turned away from him for a moment, but when Isaac saw Abraham's face again, it had changed: his gaze was wild, his whole being was sheer terror. He seized Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground, and said, 'Stupid boy, do you think I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you think it is God's command? No, it is my desire.' Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his anguish: 'God in heaven, have mercy on me, God of Abraham, have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then you be my father!' But Abraham said softly to himself, 'Lord God in heaven, I thank you; it is better that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you.'" See Exordium I, pp. 10–11, in *Kierkegaard's Writings, VI, Vol. 6: Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton University Press, 2013). He continues, "From that day henceforth, Abraham was old; he could not forget that God had ordered him to do this. Isaac flourished as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more" (Exordium II, p. 12). And then this: "It was a quiet evening when Abraham rode out alone, and he rode to Mount Moriah; he threw himself down on his face, he prayed God to forgive him his sin, that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that the father had forgotten his duty to his son. He often rode his lonesome road, but he found no peace. He could not comprehend that it was a sin that he had been willing to sacrifice to God the best that he had, the possession for which he himself would have gladly died many times; and if it was a sin, if he had not loved Isaac in this manner, he could not understand that it could be forgiven, for what more terrible sin was there?" (Exordium III, p. 13). And this: "Then they returned home again, and Sarah hurried to meet them, but Isaac had lost the faith" (Exordium IV, p. 14).

[3] See *The New York Times* online here; the story was reported in multiple media outlets, including CNN and *The Washington Post*.

[4] See Hebrews 11:17–19; James 2:21–23. Genesis 22 has had enormous influence on the way in which theologians have understood substitutionary atonement, a central idea in Christian theology and liturgy. The idea that Christ died for our sins, giving himself to death to save us from death's annihilating power, has drawn regularly on Genesis 22 for its logics.

[5] See Kierkegaard's assertion of the necessary role of paradox in such circumstances in *Fear and Trembling*, "Is There a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?" (Problema I, pp. 54–67).

[6] See Scott N. Morschauser, "'Seeing You Have Not Withheld Your Son': An Overlooked Motif in Genesis 22?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 45 (2021): 388–406. This argument, while ingenious, fails as an analogy for Genesis 22 in several key respects. Abraham does not respond verbally with rhetoric of abject submission; the divine command of child sacrifice is assuredly against the core values of the Sovereign, thus expecting not submission but resistance from the faithful believer, as in Gen 18:25; and other objections to the analogy could be raised. If the ancient Near Eastern tradition of hyperbolic vassal submission lies in the background here, it is being ironized.

[7] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Culture*, Princeton Classics (Princeton University Press, 2013).

[8] Many thinkers cite the influential work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), *Critique of Pure Reason*; see the Penguin Classics edition (2008) translated by Marcus Weigelt. Also relevant: Matthew Levering, "God and Natural Law: Reflections on Genesis 22," *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 151–177; Elie Wiesel, "In the Bible: The Akedah Revisited," lecture delivered at the 92nd Street Y in New York on 25 October 1994; Wiesel, "Return to the *Akedah*: Why I Love Isaac," lecture delivered at the 92nd Street Y on 16 May 2012.

[9] This had already been my position when I discovered these helpful words of Rabbi Shai Held on the dialogue between God and Abraham about Sodom: "God wants Abraham to train his descendants to do what is just and right, but Abraham cannot teach what he himself has not yet learned. Abraham needs to learn how to stand up for justice and how to plead for mercy, so God places him in a situation in which he can do just that…. God is willing to humble Godself by standing and waiting for Abraham in order to make sure that he intervenes on behalf of the innocent" (*The Heart of Torah, Vol. 1: Essays on the Weekly Torah Portion: Genesis and Exodus* [Jewish Publication Society, 2017], 36–37).

[10] Among many gems of literary-critical insight, Robert Alter offers this: "We should be alert to the seeming discontinuities of biblical dialogue and ponder what they might imply. When do characters ostensibly answer one another without truly responding to what the other person had said? When does the dialogue break off sharply, withholding from us the rejoinder we might have expected from one of the two speakers?" (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 227).

[11] For example, Abram/Abraham is presented as admirably faithful in Gen 12:1–8; 15:1–6; 17:1–27. But in other narratives—not only Genesis 22—Abraham's flaws are transparently on display. For the importance of reading the binding of Isaac in

the larger theological arc of Genesis, see here the sermon of biblical scholar Roy L. Heller, preached on 9 October 2025 at the Perkins School of Theology.