



Back to the Beginning

Week 5: Abraham & Isaac

Brian Mattson - 05/17/2026

Art is both deeply personal and extremely universal. All forms of it. Artists take words, pictures, music, or clay and create something completely unique, yet the thoughts and emotions they invoke are shared by us all. The way a sculptor can take us into a moment in time and allow us to witness it in three dimensions helps us see and feel in new ways. Musicians put words and melodies together that give voice to the emotions in our souls. Painters use color and light to express moods and inner thoughts that help us see the subjects in new ways.

I'm always speechless when I step into an art museum and see large oil paintings on the walls. Huge canvases from the great masters. Right here in this room we have a couple of monsters, one from the 1920s and the other from 1947 by locals, although we can't claim they're by any masters. But me? I generally like all of them: Impressionism, modern, abstract, and baroque, among others. I usually stop and stare the longest at ones in the Realism genre that feature scenes with people who look like they could be any of us. My gaze lingers and I begin to ask questions. Can I see myself in this painting? What is going on here? How are these people feeling? What are they thinking about? How can these artists paint clouds that look exactly like the sky I see with my own eyes? I have trouble drawing trees. I read the little plaques next to the canvases to inform my thoughts, but truly, art historians

can't know *everything* about these paintings and painters. Sometimes I come up with my own understanding, although the little plaques do help.

Of course, these days my favorite artwork comes home in folders from school. I get a lot of rainbows and colorful scenes from Dorothy. Jack is very interested in space right now, so most of his masterpieces are different planets or colorful diagrams of our solar system. Many times I need a little help deciphering what I'm seeing on the paper. What might be a bear to me is actually a Pokemon character, according to the artist. And I'm often informed that a certain shape or set of curves and lines is actually a human, even a member of our family on occasion. *Can't you tell, dad?*

Many stories in the Bible require a little deciphering, too. We can't go back and talk to these writers and poets who put the sentences together, but we can sit with the words. We can interpret them from our own perspectives, and with the help from other people who are wrestling with the stories as well. We learn from scholars and theologians who have gone before us to help make more sense of what's going on. Kind of like reading the little plaques. We also learn from artists who have captured these stories to help us see them in new and different ways. And our story today has no shortage of artistic interpretations. It is perhaps the most painted story of the Old Testament—The Sacrifice of Isaac. This is a hard story to read. Difficult to even imagine. It is equal parts frustrating and fascinating. So let's dig in and see what the big deal is about Abraham and Isaac.

We left Abraham last week as he entered into a covenant relationship with God. There was an odd vision and binding ceremony featuring sacrificial animals cut in half. What sounds strange to us now was more common in these primitive cultures—remember, this is an ancient book! This ceremony acted as God's signature on the contract of promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12. Promises about children, land, and blessings. With this act, God is basically saying: "If I don't fulfill my part of this covenant, may I become like these sacrificial animals, split in two." The expectations of Abraham were to

trust God and be faithful. But us humans have a hard time with patience. And trust. And faithfulness. You know what, us humans are something, aren't we?

So Abraham and Sarah were promised an heir, but after ten years with no kids, their patience was wearing out. They decided to take matters into their own hands. Sarah tells Abraham to take her servant, Hagar, as a wife to conceive a child. Hagar gets pregnant, and tensions between the three of them start to boil. Hagar runs away, but God comes to her in the wilderness and tells her to return, that the child she bears will also be the father of a multitude.

Hagar goes back and gives birth to a boy, and Abraham names him Ishmael. Surely, this must be the promised heir for Abraham. No, actually. Years later, God appears to Abraham again and informs him that his wife, Sarah, would in fact be the mother to a son named Isaac. This news causes Abraham to laugh. Sarah is 90 years old! She is far past her childbearing years, so this is laughable to old Abe. God is up to something here, once again showing that God will bring life where there is no life.

Isaac, the long-awaited heir, is finally born when Abraham is the ripe old age of 100. You would think there would be happiness and good vibes all around, but alas, Sarah wants Ishmael and Hagar gone for good this time. She makes Abraham do the dirty work of casting them out. She doesn't want Ishmael sharing any of the inheritance. This is, again, when Abraham and Sarah take matters into their own hands, forsaking God's promise to bless them, and making sure, on their terms, that Isaac would be the only heir. Is that what God hoped they would decide? Pursuing selfish ambitions rather than God's promises? Probably not. So God, again, provides for Hagar in the wilderness and saves her and young Ishmael, and makes promises to them as well.

That short summary took us through a couple chapters in Abraham's story, but this is important information to know as we explore the climactic section of his arc. This story that has captured the attention of readers and artists for

generations is a mere 19 verses in Genesis 22, and it begins with a note to the audience. Some inside information that we have, but Abraham didn't.

After these things God tested Abraham.

- Genesis 22:1

This is the storytelling device called Dramatic Irony, wherein the audience has knowledge that's kept hidden from the character. This creates tension and suspense as the story plays out. And this story is full of suspense. And what we know from this nod from the author is that there's more happening here than we might think. Scholar Tim Mackie says this:

God's intent is actually for Abraham and Sarah's good. The reader has the information that God is testing Abraham. Whatever terrible thing we think will happen, it's a test, and God is working out a bigger plan.

- Tim Mackie

So what is this test? Well, basically the worst thing you can imagine.

God said, "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."

- Genesis 22:2

Ok, this seems like some mixed messaging, right? God promised Abraham an heir and now God is telling Abraham to sacrifice his son? How could Abraham have descendants as plentiful as the stars in the night sky if the only son he has left is sacrificed as an offering to God? But no. This time there are no complaints raised by Abraham. He trusts and obeys instead of trying to force things on his own.

Abraham gets up the next morning, after what must've been a sleepless night, and takes Isaac, two servants, a donkey loaded with wood for the altar,

and heads out on a three day journey towards a mountain in Moriah. Once they arrive:

Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.

- Genesis 22:5-8

Let’s pause here for a moment halfway through this story. Imagine if you were hearing this for the first time. The suspense is really starting to build as the two embark up the mountain. There isn’t a lot of detail or explanation about how the characters are feeling. That’s up to us to decipher. That’s why this story has been captured by so many artists. Is Abraham saying “God will provide” because he has great faith, or maybe manifesting positive thoughts? Perhaps he’s just trying to keep his kid from asking more questions. We don’t know. Regardless, the two trudge on, together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

- Genesis 22:9-10

What an intense scene. The action seems to be playing out in slow motion as the audience experiences the dread and fear that this event—this

sacrifice—might actually occur. We, like Abraham, are hoping, praying, pleading that this truly is just a test.

But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide,” as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

- Genesis 22:11-14

This is a hard passage to experience. It’s hard to fathom. We wonder why it’s even necessary. I don’t have an easy answer or an explanation for those issues. This is a difficult episode in Abraham’s story. There’s a lot going on in these 14 verses, but we must remember that this harrowing moment is the climax in a longer narrative. A story about Abraham and Sarah and their journey with God. A story that is hard to explain in just one way. Much like art.

This story of Abraham and Isaac on the mountain could be seen as a forerunner to Jesus. A father who sacrifices a beloved son. Isaac carries the wood up the mountain just as Jesus carried his cross. In both instances, there was a three-day journey that culminated in a sacrifice on the same mountain where a death was reversed or reimagined.

Abraham’s story can be viewed through the lens of family dynamics. There are the brewing tensions between Sarah and Hagar, Lot and Abraham, and things are probably pretty tense between Abraham and Isaac. But not only these immediate family ties, but also the family’s checkered interactions with other communities: Egyptians, Canaanites, and other rulers. These go to

show that Abraham's engagement with other people brings both blessings and strife. Something the later Israelites who captured this story in writing would've understood clearly.

At the heart of Abraham's story are the undertones of tests and trust. God initially called Abraham and Sarah to move to a new place to do new things with God for all of creation. This can be seen as the inverse of the Adam and Eve story. A husband and wife able to make the right choice when tested. Not to give in, but to trust that God's promises are true and that God does want to work for and with humans to bring about goodness. And Abraham and Sarah's track record was a little uneven. At times they showed great faith and trust. They went to new places. They worked diligently and developed positive relationships.

On the other hand, they lacked faith. They were told God would bring a child, but their patience wavered. They made their own plans to get the promised child, forcing a servant to become a wife. They banished that servant and her son to die in the wilderness, had it not been for God's protection. So here on a mountain, God offers Abraham a final test. We know that, but Abraham doesn't. And after sending one son into the wilderness, would Abraham be willing to lose another? Here's Tim Mackie again on why Abraham is being tested.

What else is God to do with his covenant partner, but to force the issue? To give it all back. To surrender it all as the ultimate act of trust.

- Tim Mackie

Abraham passes the test, Isaac is spared, and the audience can finally breathe. But this is a hard story to move on from. This is one of those that sticks with you. What are we to make of it? Pete Enns says:

This story certainly generates a lot of questions, but it does not leave us in the dark about one thing, at least: God's command to

Abraham highlights the radical and risky nature of true trust in God.

- Pete Enns

People have spent lots of time asking questions about this story. Countless artists have captured the scene in a myriad of ways. The ancient Israelites wrestled with this story. The early Christians did too. And through it all, Abraham is lifted up as the ideal patriarch who owned a faith to be modeled. Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim says it is Abraham's trust AND response that help shape our idea of his faith.

The future is shaped not simply by the God who promises, but by the way in which recipients respond.

- Terence Fretheim

When we read these stories in the Bible and try to make sense of them in our lives, it's easy to just think "that will never be *my* story." And I hope that's the case, for all of us. But there will be times—there probably have already been times for many of you—where faith will be all you have. When God calls you to new places, will you be willing to go? When God asks for you to sacrifice something for the promise of something else, will you have faith?

These are questions we all wrestle with. And God is okay with that. In fact, one of Abraham's descendants had a famous wrestling match with God, but that's a story for next week. Ultimately, what God is calling us towards is to be people of faith who trust and respond to the promises of something better. And God gives us what we need to respond to those promises. Creativity, and skill, to paint or sculpt. Logic, to reason our way through complicated circumstances. Love, to make sure we help others to make it through as well. But when we start to doubt, when we try to go it alone and pursue our own ambitions rather than the good of all, things don't really ever pan out—*especially* when we hurt people like Hagar along the way.

We just have to keep hoping and working for heaven where we are with what we have. By painting. By singing. By building or writing or sewing or accounting or simply helping someone across the street. God has given each of us everything we need to do our parts, both as individuals and together as The Downtown Church. If we pay attention, we may see *our* ram, tangled up and just waiting for us to do God's work with it—to make earth just a little more like heaven. Let's keep our eyes peeled this week, and when we see something God-given, let's *act*. Whether or not we get our names on a little plaque, let's make something beautiful this week.