

Last week Andrew began our Summer Preaching series and the inspiration for this series came from a Eugene Peterson book I read a number of years ago. If you enjoy reading and you're looking for a book to enjoy this Summer, I would commend Peterson's book to you; it's entitled *The Jesus Way: a conversation on the ways that Jesus is the way*.

Peterson is borrowing from John 14:6 where Jesus said, concerning Himself, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life*". In describing Himself as "the way," we are meant to ask: "*The way to where?*" Most Christians are quick to respond, "*in Jesus we find the truth concerning the way to eternal life.*" Now this is certainly true—Jesus is the **way** to eternal life—but I believe there's more going on in the metaphor that Jesus employs.

Christians frequently see Jesus as the "way" to God and/or to a future, eternal, life, but doesn't Jesus also show us the way to live in the present? We might carve out time for God in our daily, or weekly, schedule: reading our Bible in the morning, prayer at meal-times, or attending a Sunday service. But does Jesus show us how to live in the rest of our lives?

Think about all of the relationships that make up your life: family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and team-mates to name a few. Think about all of the activities that make up your life: making decisions, spending money, setting priorities, going to school or work, going out with friends, raising kids, taking care of aging parents. People of faith need to ask, "*Where does God fit into all of this?*"

There are many different ways that we can choose to live. The surrounding culture presents us with a smorgasbord—a cornucopia—of paths. And our politically correct culture insists that each path is equally good and valid; to say otherwise is to be narrow-minded, judgemental. Really?

Does anyone really believe that the way of addiction is a good path? Does anyone really believe that the way of jealousy, bitterness, and anger is a good and healthy path? The way of deception, manipulation, and control may temporarily get us what we want, but what will be lost in the process? There are many ways to live, but do these ways lead to a life worth living?

And how do we choose? Must we travel down one path after another, blindly sampling from the dizzying array of choices, hoping to find the way that will lead to peace and joy?

Jesus said, "*I am the way.*" The way to where? The way to God; the way to eternal life; the way to live; the way to satisfaction; the way to wholeness; the way to peace and joy. But, of course, the way of Jesus isn't always smooth, sometimes it is rough. The way of Jesus isn't always direct, sometimes it feels like we are going in circles. We might hope that the way of Jesus is safe and predictable, but sometimes it is dangerous, hard, and narrow.

Jesus said, "*I am the way,*" and this metaphor is married to the invitation He extends to all people: "*Follow Me.*" Jesus invites us to go where He is going, to live as He lives; He **is** the way.

As we make our way through the Summer, our intention is to consider the lives of people from the Old and New Testaments to aid

in the consideration of our own lives—*did their lives, do ours, conform to the way of Jesus?* This week we will turn our attention to the way of Abraham; his life was marked by faith, testing, and sacrifice.

At this time I want to encourage you to open your Bibles with me to Genesis 12:1; we're going to begin here, before touching down on a number of different chapters in Abraham's life.

1. The Way of Faith: Our first introduction to Abraham comes through the following words: *“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. 2 I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him”*.

The way of Abraham is the way of faith—it was his confidence in God's promises that led him to active obedience. God said, “Go,” Abraham believed, and “went,” even though he didn't know where God was taking him.¹

Every person who has ever lived is a person of faith. Everyone believes in something or someone; everyone puts their trust in something or someone. Genesis chronicles Abraham's story and the word “faith”—*amman*—is only used once. Abraham was childless at the time and God promised to give him a child and to make his

descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky; Genesis 15:6 says, *“Abram believed [amman] the Lord”*. But though this word is only applied to Abraham once, his entire life was marked by it.

Everyone believes in something; everyone puts their trust in something—Abraham put his trust in the Lord. Next Sunday, we will be taking a look at the way of Jacob—Abraham's grandson; Jacob's way was marked by deception, manipulation, and control. Jacob came out of the womb grasping his twin brother's heel, exploiting every opportunity he could, in order to get ahead. Abraham was different. Early on, Abraham exercised faith; he trusted in God's trustworthiness and relinquished the notion that life was his to command.

Think for a moment about how we tend to define the word “faith.” Faith is routinely defined in terms of a strongly held belief or theory, an inner conviction. The dictionary categorizes “faith” as a noun but we do this word an injustice if it remains a noun only. Faith is more than what we believe, faith is a verb, an action word. Faith is manifested in what we do and how we live. Faith is our active response to God. God said, “Go,” Abraham believed, and “went,” even though he didn't know where God was taking him.

illus: Think again about the moments that make up your life; every relationship, every activity, is an opportunity to practice the way of faith. Every moment provides an opportunity to relinquish the notion that life is ours to command; we are invited to trust in God's trustworthiness and actively respond to His leading.

¹ Hebrews 11:8, *“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.”*

Some of you—like Abraham—have left the country of your birth. You've left behind family, friends, a job, a culture, and you've trusted God as He led you to Canada. Some of you have, or are, trusting God with decisions related to family, to schooling, to work, housing, and health—this is the way of faith.

As Abraham discovered, walking by faith often involves leaving something precious behind, in order to receive something new. The way of faith often involves facing and overcoming obstacles. The way of faith is actually quite simple—we just follow where God leads—but simple doesn't mean easy. Frequently, our faith falters. At times doubt begins to creep in: *Does God know what He's doing? Has He forgotten about me? Can I trust Him, or should I take matters into my own hands?*

The way of faith is the way of testing; it was true of Abraham, it was true of Jesus, it will be true of us.

2. The Way of Testing: Whenever I hear the word “test” my mind goes to our education system; tests are administered by teachers—they are a tool used to reveal what a student knows. In the biblical use of the word, a test doesn't reveal what we know, it reveals what we are made of. Darrell Johnson writes, “God puts us to the test to reveal and to refine: to reveal whether we are trusting God or not and to refine our trust in Him.”²

God called Abraham to leave his home country and journey to a land that would one day be his; Abraham obeyed and went. Along with the promise of land, God promised Abraham a child, and descendants

as numerous as the stars in the sky. When Abraham received this promise, he and his wife Sarah were childless and well into mid-life; conception was still physically possible but her biological clock was ticking loudly. *Can you believe it Abraham? A child! We're finally going to be parents!*

One year went by, then five, then ten. Each month they waited, hoped, prayed, and trusted; 120 such months ended in disappointment. At some point, they began to second guess what they heard from God. *Did God really promise us a child? If He did, why is it taking so long? Maybe He has forgotten about us. We need to do something about our dilemma.*

And that's exactly what they did. In Genesis 16:1-4 says, "*Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, 'The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.' Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.*"

While Ancient Near Eastern culture is very different from our own, we can easily follow the logic; in one sense, it smacks of western efficiency. The Lord had promised them land but without a child there will be no one to pass it on to. Sarah was barren, Hagar was not, a marriage of convenience, a pregnancy, and the problem was solved.

² Darrell Johnson, *57 Words That Change The World*, 94.

Faith is always tested—do we trust what God has said? With testing comes exposure; our faith is revealed for what it is—genuine, false, or mixed. Abraham and Sarah didn't go from faithful to faithless, but their trust in God's promise and provision had limits; when they reached their perceived breaking point, they took matters into their own hands. And here's the scary thing... God knew what they planned to do and He didn't stand in their way. In fact, 14 years went by before God told Abraham and Sarah that their solution wasn't a part of His plan.³

My faith, your faith, all faith, needs testing because each of us is a complex mixture of faith and doubt; in every heart both weeds and wheat grow up together. A difficult situation or relationship, a complex problem, has a way of exposing what we believe, where our loyalties lie, and who we trust. God knows what we need, He knows the way that leads to peace and joy; it can only be found in trust-filled dependence on God. And so, the test to reveal and refine.

My dear people, where is your faith being tested? Where has the voice of doubt crept in and undercut what God has said? Where have you taken matters out of God's hands and into your own?

illus: I find myself in the middle of a test these days. It's not so much that God has devised a specific, difficult, situation for me, but that life itself is the test. Like you, my life is filled with relationships, activities, responsibilities, and my heart is a complex mixture of faith and doubt, weeds and wheat.

For the last year I've been praying and asking the Lord to lead me into a deeper experience of peace and joy; as I've been praying this prayer, the Holy Spirit has opened my eyes to the ways I short circuit the possibility of peace and joy. Defensiveness, frustration, and worry are a few of the ways that peace and joy are held at bay. These dash lights of my soul have been blinking; this tells me that something is out of sync.

Waiting on God to work, to deliver, to heal, or to guide is challenging for all of us. Waiting, praying, trusting requires great faith, and often, the longer we wait, the more we feel the pressure to take matters into our own hands. I often feel this pressure. Ten years ago, when I joined the staff team here at North Shore Alliance, I was given the title of "Lead Pastor," and the way I've worn this title hasn't always been good for my soul.

What do leaders do? They lead, they decide, they act, they keep their heads when others are losing theirs; leaders know what to do, where they're going, and how to get there. The truth is, some times I don't know what God is doing, or where He wants to lead us, and it's in those moments that the pressure mounts—do I wait, pray, and trust, or do I try to make something happen?

A few weeks ago, I took my Bible and my journal and I found a secluded place in the woods. Jesus had been making me aware of the frustration and worry I had been carrying; He had been showing me that it was standing in the way of the peace and joy that I long to experience. As I sat before the Lord, I asked Him to show me the root

³ Cf. Genesis 17:1-21.

of the problem, and He revealed a lie that has worked its way into my heart.

What's the lie? That my value and worth as a husband, father, and leader is tied to my performance, my intelligence, in having the right answers, knowing where to go and what to do—if I don't have this, then maybe I don't have anything to offer my wife, my kids, or any of you. Having an answer for every question, knowing what to do in every situation...that's a God-sized role, not a Mark-sized responsibility.

The way of Jesus always involves testing, but it's not pass or fail kind of test. Our faith is tested so that our relationship with God can be refined; in my case, the test exposed a lie, and I was invited to shed false responsibility. With greater trust and dependence comes peace, joy, and freedom.

Where is your faith being tested? Where has the voice of doubt crept in and undercut God's promises? Where have you taken matters out of God's hands and into your own? Abraham's life was marked by faith, by testing, and by sacrifice; let's now turn our attention to this third marker.

3. The Way of Sacrifice: By the time we get to Genesis 22—the encounter on Mount Moriah—Abraham had a lot of experience in sacrifice. Many years before, at God's invitation, Abraham and Sarah left their home country, and along with it, whatever inheritance of land that was theirs. Over the years, Abraham and Sarah got used to settling down and then uprooting whenever God asked them to move.

Some of you have moved around a lot and you know how hard it can be; you feel like you leave a piece of yourself behind, every time you move away. Abraham left his home country, but he also left Shechem, Bethel (twice), Egypt, Gerar, and Beersheba. There's a cost to leaving; Abraham had learned the meaning of sacrifice.

We tend to think about “abundance” or “fulfillment” in terms of “getting” and “acquiring;” with wisdom we come to understand that true abundance and fulfillment cannot be reached without “letting go”. Peterson writes, “A sacrificial life is the means, and the only means, by which a life of faith matures.”⁴

It's incremental of course. We begin with small sacrifices of obedience and worship; we begin by laying down our preferences for the sake of those we love. We sacrifice our time by serving and our money by giving. We strengthen the muscles of sacrifice moment by moment, and the day comes when the opportunity to sacrifice fills us with joy.

The word “sacrifice” implies the laying down of something valuable or costly. In the context of worship, sacrifice involves offering something valuable or costly to God. But here's the thing, we don't have anything that God needs; God is beyond need—He is sufficient in every way. Our sacrifice does not fill a need in God, instead, our sacrifice is an expression of thanksgiving, loyalty, and love.

The altar that Abraham built on Mount Moriah was one of many. When he left his home country of Haran and arrived in Shechem, he built an altar to the Lord; when he arrived in Bethel, and later in

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: a conversation on the ways that Jesus is the way*, 50.

Hebron, he built an altar.⁵ But what made the altar at Moriah so different was what Abraham was asked to sacrifice.

In Genesis 22:1-2 we read, “*1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. 2 Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.’*”

It’s a shocking request on a number of levels. To our modern ears, the request sounds outrageous, immoral, but in an Ancient Near Eastern culture, child sacrifice was relatively common—costly, no doubt, but not unheard of. Nowhere does God attempt to justify or qualify His request. God does not make this request of any other parent, and it’s quite clear from the rest of the Scriptures that God abhorred child sacrifice. And so, without the inside information of vs. 1, we are at a loss to explain God’s request.

It’s a test. *Abraham, I want you to lay down your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, on the altar.* Isaac, the son God had promised, the son they had waited decades for, was to be offered to God in sacrifice? It was a test. God never intended Abraham to go through with it, but the test revealed what he was made of; the test was designed to reveal Abraham’s ultimate loyalty.

Genesis 22 does not report Abraham’s internal angst, nor are we told

⁵ Genesis 12:7; 8; 13:8.

⁶ Peterson, 5.

about Abraham discussing the matter with Sarah. What we do know is that early the next morning, Abraham and Isaac set out for the region of Moriah. When they reached their destination, Abraham built a stone altar and laid his son upon it. We’re told that Isaac himself had carried the wood for the sacrifice, and if he was strong enough to carry the wood, he would have been strong enough to resist Abraham when it came time to be bound. It would appear that both Abraham and Isaac trusted in God’s trustworthiness.

The story concludes with God calling off the sacrifice—at the last moment—and providing a ram in place of Abraham’s son. It was a test, and Abraham’s loyalty was revealed...he would hold nothing back from God, not even his only son.

What we love can so easily become a rival god. And so the test—*take your son, your only son, whom you love, and lay him on the altar.* Has what we love become a rival god? For parents, it could be their children; for students, it could be their friends, or their grades; for athletes, it could be their performance; for business people it could be their title; for the fearful, it could be their safety, or their money; for the proud, it could be their reputation. What we love can so easily become a rival god.

Eugene Peterson notes, “The operating biblical metaphor regarding worship is sacrifice—we bring ourselves to the altar and let God do with us what he will.”⁶ When God asks us to lay something down that we consider valuable or costly, it is always because He has

something of greater worth for us. I wonder, *is there anything you need to lay down?*

Conclusion: The way of Abraham was marked by faith, testing, and sacrifice; it turns out, this isn't simply the way of Abraham, it's the Jesus Way, the path all of us are invited to walk.

Jesus' earthly ministry was marked by faith. For Jesus, His faith was a verb, an action word that was manifest in what He did and how He lived. When the Father said, "Go," His Son, Jesus Christ, believed, and went.

And was Jesus's life not also marked by testing? For 40 days Jesus was testing by Satan in the desert; He was given the opportunity to take matters into His own hands, to make a name for Himself, to achieve His ultimate goal by way of a shortcut. His ministry was marked by repeated testing—pressures, expectations, and threats; each test revealed what Jesus was made of.

Faith and testing marked Jesus' life, but in the end, we cannot speak about Jesus without mentioning His sacrifice on the cross. God spared Abraham and Isaac by providing a different sacrifice; Jesus willingly, joyfully, laid down His life. At the cross, He shouldered our sin, failure, and brokenness. Jesus died in our place that we might receive forgiveness, healing, and restoration to relationship with God. What a Saviour! What a Friend!

Jesus said, "*I am the way,*" and this metaphor is married to the invitation He extends to all people: "*Follow Me.*" Jesus invites us into the way of faith, testing, and sacrifice. We will find—as we follow—the Jesus way it utterly unique; it's more demanding, and more wonderful than any other way.

Pray

Worship

Benediction