

The story of Abraham and Isaac leaves most people flabbergasted. Early in the Book of Genesis God promised Abraham many descendants, but the patriarch had to wait nearly 100 years for the birth of his first child. Now that the boy has become a little older, now that Abraham has come to love this son, now that Abraham trusts God really will deliver on promises – God asks Abraham to perform an utterly reprehensible act: to kill his only son, ending the life of the child he waited 100 years to see, closing off the possibility of more descendants through this son.

You have to wonder, “What was God thinking? How could God possibly command a father to kill his only son?” It’s way out of line. The only explanation we get comes in the first line of today’s reading: “God put Abraham to the test.” We know from the start of the story what Abraham did not know: This was a test, like the emergency broadcast system with its rasping squeal. “This was only a test.” In the end, God does not want bloodshed. But you shouldn’t bluff people this way.

Today if you think God is telling you to kill your child, we would say you have the wrong message. That isn’t how God works. The same can be said to suicide bombers convinced they are doing God’s will: “Probably not. You got the wrong message. Go back and pray again.” Whenever we face a difficult decision, we listen for God’s will. But after prayer, if we think God wills us to do something wrong, we probably got the wrong message – or in Abraham’s case, an incomplete one.

God’s will should never have us do something wrong, but God may have us do something difficult. Sometimes God’s will is harsh. You may spend a large part of your life with more sorrow than you deserve: you may suffer poor health, addiction, time in jail, family disputes, theft, personal injury, tarnishing of your name, rejection by a close friend, or – the sorrow that people most fear – a loss by the local basketball team. In the midst of pain, you may ask, “Why is God asking me to live like this?” I’ll tell you. I don’t know. But these two points I know from the story of Abraham and Isaac: God asks us to do difficult things, and in the end God’s will is grace – not hardship. Through our difficulties God gives us grace.

Maybe the day has already come, maybe it is yet to be, but one day God may ask for something very dear to you. God may ask you to endure a loss, to devote your life to some other cause, or to give up control of something you wish was going your way. God’s will may be hard, but it always leads to grace.