

“God Will Provide”

Genesis 22:1-18, First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018

A man was walking along a mountain road one day, not really paying all that much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he was falling, he grabbed a branch growing out from the side of that cliff. Realizing that he couldn't hang on to it for long, he calls out for help: “Is there anybody up there?”

“Yes,” a voice replied. “Who are you?” the dangling cliffhanger wanted to know. “The Lord!” the voice answered. “Lord, help me!” “Do you trust me?” asked the Lord. “Yes, Lord, I trust you completely!” “Good,” the Lord said, “then let go of that branch!”

“What?” the man replied. “I said let go of that branch!”

After a long pause, the man yelled back: “Is there anybody else up there?”

Certainly the Patriarch Abraham was well-acquainted with such genuine tests! Some of those tests he passed with flying colors and others he failed dismally, but our Old Testament lesson this morning (Genesis 22:1-18) presents us with the greatest challenge that Abraham would ever face in his whole life. Concerning this troublesome story, the great commentator Matthew Henry one day wrote: “Never was any gold tried in so hot a fire!”

Our Old Testament lesson this morning begins with these words: *“After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I!’ (v. 1)* This phrase: *“After these things”* takes us all the way back to 10 chapters earlier when God first met Abram and told him and his wife Sarai to leave behind everything that was familiar to them and to set out for a new country that the LORD God would give to them, not even telling Abram and Sarai where they were going! God promised to bless all the nations of the earth through Abraham's descendants, yet Abraham and Sarah remain childless for years! Of course, like all of us, there are times when they grew impatient with God and take matters in own hands; a strategy for people of faith that always results in disaster. But finally that day did come when Sarah was 90 years old and Abraham was 100 years old and she conceived and bore to Abraham a son; a baby they named “Isaac,” which means literally “giggles” in Hebrew, because Sarah giggled when she first heard the message from the angel sent to Abraham that even at this late stage in the game called life, she would give birth to a son!

First, let's remember that the Triune God is always sovereign in everything. The Triune God is all-knowing in everything. Before God tests Abraham's faith in such a tremendous, some might even say, “stupendous” way—God knows what the outcome of that day's events were going to be ahead of time. Nothing ever comes as a surprise to our God!

Secondly, God did not just know what he was going to do ahead of time! He also knew that Abraham would pass this test superbly with flying colors, when the test would be given to him!

And don't we remember Jesus exercising this same kind of omniscience with respect to the challenges, or tests, that he sometimes places before his disciples?

In John 6, we are told how Jesus challenged his 12 disciples to feed the hungry multitudes one day—over 5000 men in addition to many women and children. We read in verse 5, *“When Jesus lifted up his eyes, seeing a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?’”* If anyone should have known the answer to that question, it was Philip, because Jesus and his disciples were presently in Philip’s hometown. But let’s not forget what John tells us in the very next verse, John 6:6, *“Jesus said this on to test Philip, for he himself knew what he would do!”*

Thirdly, let’s remember that Abraham had been walking with God for about 35 years now, before God tested him in this most challenging way! God did not give this test to Abraham until Abraham was indeed ready for it! One of the great things about God is that he does not give us tests that we cannot pass, though we may sometimes in our unbelief fail to pass them! But listen also to what St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:13, *“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it!”*

Some commentators see in Abraham’s final words to his servant who had also accompanied them on this trip, *“Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you!”* as an actual expression of Abraham’s own deep personal belief that already then—Abraham fully expected that Isaac, being raised from the dead, would return also back before Abraham’s servant with him! No way, you say! You’ve never really heard this part of the story before!

Well if this were merely human beings putting their own spin upon Abraham’s words as to what Abraham was really saying, then we might discount them altogether! But listen to what we read in the New Testament book of Hebrews, of course regarded by the Church throughout the ages to be nothing less than the inspired Word of God, in Hebrews 11:17-19! *“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ Abraham considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back!”*

But it was never really God’s intention that Isaac should have been sacrificed by Abraham on Mount Moriah. And it’s especially during this season of Lent that the whole Church is being challenged to focus our fullest attention on the Lamb of God which our Heavenly Father did provide to save us from our sins: *“Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain could give the guilty conscience peace or wash away the stain. But Christ, the heavenly Lam takes all our sins away; a sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than they! May faith would lay its hand on that dear head divine, as penitently here I stand, confessing guilt is mine. My soul looks back to see the burden you did bear, when hanging on the cursed tree, I know my guilt was there!”* (LW 99:1-4).

Listen to what the great Bible scholar Stuart Briscoe has to say about this most formidable challenge God had set before Abraham: *“Faith is matured through the experience of stressful testing in much the same way that the cardiovascular system is strengthened through exercise and in much the same way that muscles are developed by pumping iron!”*

Friends the story of Abraham’s being asked to take his son, his only son Isaac whom he loved to Mount Moriah and to sacrifice him there to the LORD GOD is a story that is in a class all by itself in the Bible. There is no story similar to this one and the request that God is making of Abraham here to be found anywhere else in the entire Bible!

And yet, for all of it seemingly outward sordid nature, the writer does tell his intended audience from the get-go that this was only going to be a “TEST”! *“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I!’ God said to him: ‘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 of which I will tell you’ (Genesis 22:1-2)!*

Some commentators have suggested that the greatest horror here is not the command for a human sacrifice. The greatest horror is the time delay. It’s not an immediate sacrifice. God doesn’t say, “Sacrifice Isaac now.” He says, “GO TO THE LAND OF MORIAH, AND OFFER HIM THERE.”

Mount Moriah is more than a three-day journey from Abraham’s tent in Beersheba. It would later serve as the mountain in Jerusalem where Solomon would build the Temple (*2 Chronicles 3:1*). Abraham not only has to sacrifice his son. Abraham has time to think about it before it happens.

The rest of that day, Abraham thought and mulled over what God had said. The next morning, he got up early (*v. 3*)—probably having not slept all night—and began to pack for the trip to Moriah. The next three days on the road would be three of the longest days of Abraham’s life. For three days, Abraham, Isaac and two servants walked with a donkey in three days of silent trial and testing.

Even as Abraham, when he hears God’s Word concerning offering his son, although, indeed, he had cause enough for disputing as to whether the words should be understood according to the letter or with a tolerable or milder interpretation, since they conflicted openly not only with all reason and with the divine and natural law, but also with the chief article of faith concerning the promised Seed, Christ, who was to be born of Isaac, nevertheless, just as previously, when the promise of the blessed Seed from Isaac was given him, he gave God the honor of truth, and most confidently concluded and believed that what God promised He could also do, although it appeared to be impossible to his reason; so also here he understands and believes God’s Word and command plainly and simply, as they read according to the letter, and commits the matter to God’s omnipotence and wisdom, which, he knows, has many more modes and ways to fulfill the promise of the Seed from Isaac than he can comprehend with his blind reason. God supplies unforgettable faith. Faith stronger than any man’s understanding and reason. *“Indeed, none that wait for [the LORD] shall be put to shame” (Psalm 25:3)*. Faith that even goes against what is reasonable to our minds and our sight. St. Paul writes about this to the Romans: *“In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be’ (Romans 4:18-22)!*

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

While St. Paul talked primarily about Isaac’s birth, Abraham’s faith was only beginning with that promise. Abraham’s unforgettable faith continues as his name changes. God renamed him from Abram to Abraham (*Genesis 17:5*). Abram means “exalted father”. Abraham means “father of many”. This same Abraham had been promised, at the age of ninety-nine mind you, that he was going to become a father (*Genesis 18:13-14*). Abraham understood faith. He lived faith. And that faith never wavered. Those three days on the road to Moriah, Abraham “believed against hope” (*Romans 4:18*) that God would still keep His promises. Even with Isaac dead, God would bless him with the great number of descendants that would come through Isaac. How do we know his faith never wavered? After three days of silence, what does Abraham say to his servants? What

does he tell them when he leaves them with the donkey? *“Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you”* (v5).

He firmly believed that he and Isaac were going to return from Moriah and go back home with the servants. “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (*Hebrews 11:19*). Abraham set up the sacrifice. He piled the stones together to make the altar. He laid the wood across the top. He tied Isaac up and laid him down on top of the altar. He raised the knife over his head in order to kill his son, his “only son”.

Knife poised over Isaac’s bound body, Abraham was ready to drive it deep into his son’s heart. But God stops him. Isaac’s life would not be necessary today. We have the classic Sunday School picture of the events on Mount Moriah. An angel appears and physically stops Abraham’s arm. God says from Heaven, *“DO NOT LAY YOUR HAND ON THE BOY OR DO ANYTHING TO HIM, FOR NOW I KNOW THAT YOU FEAR GOD, SEEING YOU HAVE NOT WITHHELD YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON, FROM ME”* (v12). God stops Abraham from sacrificing his son.

In the thicket, on the edge of the top of the hill, a ram bleated. Its horns were stuck in the thicket. Abraham saw it and knew the prophecy he had made to his son had come true. God provided the lamb for the sacrifice (v8, 13). Abraham moved Isaac off the altar. He cut the binding rope. The knife once raised over his prone son’s body came crashing down into the ram’s struggling body. The ram was sacrificed in Isaac’s stead. A foreshadowing of the coming sacrifice. The fulfillment of all of God’s promises that He had made to him.

The moment the ram was sacrificed and set aflame brought the relief that Abraham had eagerly sought the three previous days. His faith in God had not wavered. He simply didn’t understand how God was going to keep all His promises with this latest commandment. Now, he understood. He believed the ancient Gospel story of the Seed of the woman who would crush Satan’s head and take away the sin of the world (*Genesis 3:15; John 1:29*). The ram had taken Isaac’s place on the altar. This sacrifice showed the great sacrifice that would be made for all mankind.

The great sacrifice that God would not stop for anything. The sacrifice that couldn’t happen if God had stopped it. Jesus was sacrificed to purchase the forgiveness of your sins. Had He not died, you would still be in your sins. You would still be looking for a way to have your sins forgiven. A way to achieve Heaven. But it cannot be achieved without Jesus’ sacrifice.

The sacrifice marked by the miraculous darkness at Jesus’ crucifixion (*Matthew 27:45*). The darkness that covered the whole world in judgment. The darkness that came because God the Father turned His back on His Son. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, had become the sin of the world (*2 Corinthians 5:21*). God and sin cannot co-exist. As Jesus hung on the cross as the embodiment of the whole world’s sin, God removed Himself from creation. Without this removal, Jesus would not be sacrificed. Forgiveness would not be yours.

Jesus’ death was necessary for our salvation. He is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (*John 1:29*). The ram caught in the thicket had to be killed for Abraham’s sacrifice for Isaac to be complete. That sacrifice redeemed Isaac from the price that God had demanded to be paid. Without Jesus’ death, your sin would not have been redeemed. Without Jesus’ death, your world would still be filled with despair over your sins (*LSB 434*). Without Jesus’ resurrection, your salvation would be uncertain (*1 Corinthians 15:12-19*). Jesus wants nothing about your salvation to be uncertain. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a first fruits of His creatures” (*James*

1:17-18). God wants us to be as certain as Abraham in our faith. Certain that no trial, tribulation or commandment can shake our faith off its foundation.

God promised through Abraham that He would provide the Lamb for the sacrifice. The ram caught in the thicket pointed towards the Lamb that would be sacrificed for the whole world. The Lamb that would come directly from God. The Lamb—the “one perfect final offering” (*LSB #547.2*)—that could truly take away the sin of the world. The Lamb who makes us truly able to pray, “Remember Your mercy, O LORD, and Your steadfast love, for they have been from old” (*Psalms 25:6*) and “Worthy is the Lamb whose death makes me His own! The Lamb is reigning on His throne!” (*LSB #547*). The Lamb who died for you. Amen.