

Genesis 22:1-14

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 2 He 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.” 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 5 Then 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.” 6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. 7 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?” 8 Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

22:9 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. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 12 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.” 13 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. 14 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.”

A STRANGE AND DISTURBING STORY

Have you ever read a story in the Bible and thought, “This seems like a very strange and disturbing story?” I have. Take today’s lesson for instance.

Some people may say that the Bible is the answer, but at first blush this story gives me more questions than answers. If you really hear this story it stirs deep emotions.

What kind of God would devise a test like this? And what kind of father would say yes to sacrificing his own son?

A preacher tells of a showing a video to an adult Sunday school class. It was a very realistic depiction of this story. And after the film no one knew what to do or say. They sat in stunned silence. It didn’t fit with their idea of who God is or who we are called to be as parents.

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If you really hear this passage you want to say, “Run Isaac, run! Don’t let him get you! Wake up kid! You’re the sacrifice!”

Since I’m a child of the sixties and seventies when I read this story I sometimes think about Bob Dylan’s protest song. “God said to Abraham, ‘Kill me a son.’ Abe said to God, ‘You must be puttin’ me on!”

Actually, Abraham didn’t say that. If he had, maybe this passage wouldn’t give me so much trouble. And it’s not like Abraham didn’t argue with God before.

Do you remember when God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah? Abraham literally tried to bargain with God to keep judgment and destruction from coming to that ancient city.

But, now when his son, his only son’s life is on the line what does Abraham do? He gets up early in the morning, packs up the donkey, Isaac and a few servants and heads out to the place where he will sacrifice his son.

The Scripture doesn’t say for sure, but it seems like he doesn’t even tell Sarah where he’s going and what he’s going to do. In this story I’m not real happy with Abraham or his God.

Now, I know. We have to read the rest of the story. We know how it ends. We know that it’s just a test.

But, Abraham didn’t know that. Why did God put him through all this anguish? Did Abraham really have to be on the brink of killing his only son before God could know that he trusted him?

SKIP TO THE END OF THE STORY?

The text doesn’t give us any answers to those questions. Maybe it would be better to just forget about the first part of this story and concentrate on how it ends. The Lord provides.

Now there is a message that is easier to preach. When we have a need the Lord provides.

But, of course the trouble with just focusing upon the last verse is that is easy to turn the Bible into a new form of trivial pursuit.

I once heard a lady pray for good weather on Tuesday so that she could play tennis! I bet some of you may have prayed, “Lord, help me find a parking space in this crowded lot.”

Now I know what some of you might say. God wants us to pray about everything. Nothing is too big or too small for God. God wants us to ask for what we need. God will provide.

But, I would contend that God is not a cosmic genie or a heavenly ATM machine. If our prayers are too small, if we skip the hard part of the story and go right to the “God will provide” part, the story is changed beyond recognition.

There is no such thing as cheap grace. Grace comes at a very high price. Just look at what happened to Abraham. And just look at what happened to Jesus.

Grace comes at the price of sacrificing a son. Grace comes at the price of a cross. Grace comes after you climb a mountain in the land of Moriah. Grace comes after you ascend an even darker mount in a place called Calvary.

A COSTLY SACRIFICE

There are some commentators who say that we shouldn’t interpret the passage this way, that the Old Testament story should be told and interpreted without reference to the New Testament. But, we can’t do that.

Just as we know from the very beginning of this story that it is a test of faith, that God is not going to have Abraham murder his child, so we also know from the very beginning about another story, about another beloved son who was sacrificed.

He had a heavy wooden burden laid upon his back. We’re not so sure why that had to happen either. But, we know that it did, and we know that because of that sacrifice God provided an even greater salvation.

We are so familiar with the stories of the Bible that we often talk about salvation in a way that is shallow and empty. We talk about how God provided at Moriah and at Calvary. And God did.

But, we often forget about the anguish of taking a son up a mountain knowing that it is the mountain of sacrifice. And so I return to my original questions. What kind of father does this? What kind of God allows this to happen?

THE PROMISE

It certainly doesn’t sound like the God revealed just a few chapters earlier in the book of Genesis. In those chapters we read that God made Abraham a promise. God said that Abraham and Sarah would conceive a son in their old age.

Imagine that. Abraham and Sarah are about ready for the nursing home, and God promises that their future will soon be in the hospital delivery room!

Abraham was not quite ready to believe in this promise. He tried to help God out a bit by having a child with a surrogate, his servant Hagar.

But, God had the last laugh. Abraham and Sarah had a son together, a boy named Isaac. His name referred to the laughter that he brought into this old couple's life. He was a living miracle.

The faith journey of Abraham was long and winding. He spent most of his days wandering in the wilderness; searching for the place that God would show him. But, maybe now at the end of the journey he had learned to trust God in an even deeper way.

Yes, God would make Abraham the father of many nations through his son, Isaac. But, the promise did not depend on the works that Isaac or any of his many children would do. The promise depended upon the power of God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth.

By the way I think that this is where many of us make a mistake. We think that our future is wrapped up in our children. Sometimes we even try to manipulate the lives of our children in an attempt to live out our hopes and dreams through them.

But, I think that we must in a sense sacrifice our children to the Lord. We must give all our children to the Lord trusting that God will provide for them. We must trust the ones we love the most to God, believing that come what may, God will provide.

This is not an easy thing to do. Almost every person here today knows that this mountain can be very hard to climb. And, like Abraham, if we try to help God out and force things, we often end up doing something that can even be detrimental to the faith development of the ones we love.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

I don't think that you or I will be tested with the same challenge that came Abraham's way. In fact, I think it's possible that Abraham was influenced by the pagan culture of his day. He just thought that God wanted him to sacrifice his son. And I think it's possible that God used Abraham's misunderstanding to teach a greater lesson.

In fact I think that's exactly how God works. God often uses our misfortunes, our misunderstandings and our difficult sacrifices to help us know his salvation in a deeper way.

Our test will not be the same as Abraham's test. But, we will be tested by life. And we will be tempted to try and figure it out on our own or give in to anger and doubt.

But, the Bible is a collection of stories about how God used imperfect people in difficult situations to proclaim a message of eternal hope. The Bible is about how God provides for our salvation as we climb that wild and windy mountain called despair.

God gives us hope when it looks like all that we love will be lost.

Isaac's own son, Jacob, would learn this lesson after a dark night of wrestling with God. When the dawn finally came Jacob would be blessed, but he would also walk the rest of his life with a limp.

When we do evil God often uses that evil for a greater good. That's what Abraham's great grandson Joseph would learn at the end of his journey. His brothers sold him into slavery, but God used that evil act for a greater good.

And in the gospels we see this with Jesus. A tearful, agonized Jesus wished that he could avoid drinking from the cup of suffering. But, with trust in his heart he said, "Not my will but yours be done."

The journey was never easy, but in the end they all trusted in the providence and goodness of God. And in the end God did provide.

The promise of God has always come through struggle. We have the hope of the resurrection, but Jesus also said that we are to take up a cross and follow him. The time of testing and sacrifice come to us all. But, as the Psalmist tells us though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil. God is with us. God provides for us.

Some people think that it is God's job to make our way easy. If that's what you believe, you will soon lose faith. At some point in everyone's journey the way will get steep and rocky. Sacrifice will come to us all.

We are mortal and we are sinful. The climb up the mountain of sacrifice is inevitable.

But, through it all God makes a way where there seems to be no way. God gives us what we need the most.

SACRIFICING TO A LESSER GOD

Rabbi Norman Cohen wrote about our tendency to sacrifice everything for things that are not of ultimate value in his commentary on this passage. He wrote,

"We are all like Abraham; so involved in our outside world—our careers, interests or principles—that we do not or cannot see that it is our child, or spouse or parent that is bound on the altar.

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We are so adept at sacrificing that which is truly important to us on the altars we have erected that we may ask whether we are capable of hearing the cry of the angel before it is too late.”

I think the Rabbi has a point. Is it really God who calls us to sacrifice the ones we love? Or could it be that the voice we hear is not the voice of God but the sound of our own ambition.

One advantage of sacrificing everything, even the one we love most to God is that we do not end up sacrificing them to some lesser god. Lesser gods are never satisfied with the sacrifices we make.

The god of economic prosperity always desires just a little bit more. The god of war always desires just one more battle to make the world safe. The god of desire requires just one more expression of love.

These gods are never satisfied no matter how much we give. These gods have an insatiable desire to take over our lives. These gods require sacrifices that cost too much. These gods make promises that are never fulfilled.

But, the one true God can be trusted to give us what we need when we need it. If in humility we turn our lives over to him, if we lay all that is precious to us on the altar of sacrifice, we can learn in a personal way that the promises of God are true.

DAILY BREAD AND RESURRECTION

When Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” he was teaching us to trust the goodness of God. This is a comforting prayer because it is a realistic prayer. We can’t get ahead of God in this journey of faith. All we can do is trust God to provide and take the next step.

I think that’s why Abraham is lifted up as an example of faith in the book of Hebrews (11:17-19). Toward the end of his life Abraham finally learned to walk with God one day at a time and trust his future and the future of his family to the Providence of God.

He reasoned that nothing was too hard for God, even a resurrection.

The writer of Hebrews suggested this. He wrote that Abraham believed that if sacrificed his son, the God who made heaven and earth could raise him from the dead.

And there are hints of this in the Genesis story. Note that when Abraham left his servants on the plain as he and Isaac headed for the hills Abraham said,

“We will go and worship, and we will return to you.”

Belief in the hope of resurrection begins with the story of Abraham.

And, according to Hebrews figuratively speaking Abraham did receive his son back from the dead. Abraham was committed to the sacrifice, but God intervened.

God made a way when there seemed to be no way. In this case God's surprising salvation in the form of a ram stuck in the thicket provided that way.

And of course this foreshadowed the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This foreshadowed a Son who would be sacrificed and would be raised from the dead.

GET IN THE WHEELBARROW!

What about you? Do you think that God will provide? Are you willing to sacrifice everything in order to follow that God?

Are you willing to sacrifice your self-reliance? Are you willing to sacrifice your desires? Are you willing to sacrifice your plans for the future?

Are you willing to sacrifice the naïve wishful thinking that somehow you will be immune to the struggles and pain that have faced the faithful who have gone before us?

Faith is not developed in a classroom. Faith is not passed on as a family legacy.

As it happened with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all those who came after them, faith is learned through our unique journey with God. Faith is learned when God's story (His-story, if you will) intersects with our story.

And when we learn that lesson, we learn that God doesn't necessarily provide a way out. But, God does provide a way through.

There's an old illustration that makes this point very well. It seems that a high wire artist was dazzling a crowd. He walked across the high wire with ease. He stood on one hand. He jumped up and down.

The crowd was amazed at his ability. They cheered wildly. And then the artist addressed the crowd. He asked do you think that I can push this wheelbarrow across the wire. They all cried, "We know you can."

So he did it. He took it across with the greatest of ease. The crowd was enthralled. Then the artist asked, "Do you think I can take the wheelbarrow across with someone in it?" By this time the crowd had total faith in the ability of the high wire artist. They cried as one, "Yes you can."

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And then the artist replied, “Great. Who wants to be first to take a ride?” A sudden hush came over the crowd.

You see faith cannot be something that we believe in theory. Faith is something that we must practice. Do you believe that God will provide?

It’s time to get in the wheelbarrow!

Amen.