

“The Lord Will Provide”

It may be one of the most emotionally charged scenes imaginable. Struggling to hold back tears, heart pounding, the father scans the horizon from his position on the mountaintop. Too many thoughts speed through his head to really even consider. Then he looks back, down at the altar of stone, down at the pile of wood, down at his own, dearly beloved son. He swallows hard and reaches out his hand, bringing the sharp blade of his knife slowly closer to the boy.

The events that led to that scene were set in motion many years earlier. God himself had called Abraham, who was then called Abram, to leave his homeland and to leave his family. He and his wife, along with his nephew, had followed God’s direction. Led by God, they came to the land of Canaan, and there they lived. They relied on the promises of God to care for them and to bless them, and they held to the special promise of God that through Abraham’s descendants, he would bring blessing to the whole world. Abraham was seventy-five years old.

Abraham was older still when God renewed his promise. He told Abraham that his descendants would be too numerous to even count, like the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the beach. Abraham and his wife waited and waited, sometimes patiently, sometimes not. Eventually, Abraham was ready to resign himself to the fact that his servant would inherit his property, and God would use his servant’s family to bring blessing to the world. But God gave his assurance: Abraham’s own son would be heir not only of his property, but also of the Lord’s promise.

God came to Abraham again when he was ninety-nine years old to give him good news. Within a year, he and his wife would have a son, after ninety-nine years of waiting and wanting. And one year later, Abraham – 100 year old Abraham – had a son, Isaac.

The name Isaac sounds like the Hebrew word for “laughter.” The name of Abraham’s son recalled the laughter with which he and his wife Sarah had received the good news in their old age. They laughed at times doubting that God would finally grant them such a blessing, and they laughed with overwhelming joy when the day finally arrived. Their special son was here.

Our sermon text, the first lesson this morning from the Old Testament book of Genesis, picks up the story years later. By now Isaac is perhaps a teenager. At this time, we are told that God “tested” Abraham. God was not tempting Abraham to sin, nor was he testing Abraham for God’s benefit. God was providing Abraham an opportunity to demonstrate his faith, to put into practice the trust of God that was in his heart. God was teaching Abraham a powerful lesson.

“Abraham, you have waited long for a son. You have waited to see my promise come to fulfillment. And now you have seen it. Now you have your own son, your only son, a son you love very deeply. I’m going to show you a mountain in the region of Moriah, and on that mountain I want you to give Isaac over to me as a burnt offering.”

My heart races just imagining the mental anguish that Abraham must have gone through. Did I hear God right? Did the God I've followed for so long really ask me to do that? What about the promises? What about the great number of descendants? What about the great things God would accomplish through my family? On the other hand, it is God, it is the Lord who asks this of me. How can I not listen? How can I disobey?

And the test was set. How would you fare with such a test? I'm not suggesting that God would ask you to sacrifice a child, nor am I expecting any of us to find ourselves in a situation quite like Abraham's. But really, the test boils down to a simple question: which is more important, the blessings God has given us, or the God who gave them? What would I be willing to give up if God asked me to? My house? My car? My money? My time? Would you be willing to give up something important to you if God asked you to? Are you willing to make the sacrifices that God does ask of you? Would you be willing to set aside a percentage of your income to support the work of the church and the sharing of the Gospel? Would you be willing to give some of your time to serving others? Would you be willing to sacrifice your own level of comfort to stand up for your beliefs?

Abraham got up early. The next day – the very next day he set out to do exactly what God had asked of him. Three days of travel gave him plenty of time to think about his decision. On he went to the place God told him about.

When he was near the place, Abraham took with him only what he needed. The servants stayed behind, and on he went, with Isaac carrying the wood for the burnt offering. Abraham brought the knife and the fire.

But wasn't something missing? **"Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"** asked the inquisitive young man. Everything else appeared taken care of.

Abraham said the most loving response he could think of. He didn't need to burden his son any further until the time was right. He may not have wanted to say out loud what he knew in his heart. Fully believing that God had provided the lamb for the burnt offering, Abraham assured Isaac, **"God himself will provide the lamb."**

We gain some insight into Abraham's faith when we turn to Hebrews chapter 11. There we find a "Hall of Fame" of sorts, the great "Heroes of Faith" chapter of the Bible. Abraham is a prominent figure there. We are told, **"By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead"** (17-19).

Abraham acted in faith. He believed that God could and would keep his promises no matter what Abraham did. He refused to let anything or anyone get in the way of following God's instructions. He believed that God would provide.

And God did provide. Before Abraham could go through with the sacrifice of his son, God stepped in and stopped him. Abraham had reached the end of God's test for him; he had

demonstrated his willingness to obey God in faith. God didn't want Abraham to offer his son in worship, but God provided another alternative. Abraham could express his worship to God in another way. There in the brush was a ram. Abraham offered it to God in the place of his son, Isaac. The Lord will provide.

Abraham trusted that the Lord would provide. Through this test, the Lord gave Abraham further evidence of this by preserving the life of his son. God also renewed his promise to provide, not only for Abraham, but also for the whole world. Once again the Lord assured Abraham, **“through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.”**

That promise, which had sustained Abraham, is the same promise that sustains us. The promise that motivated Abraham to act in faith calls us to believe. The promise is that of a Savior.

The season of Lent invites us to take a long and serious look at our lives, and to humbly acknowledge our sins. This morning we have done exactly that as we walked with Abraham up a mountainside where he had gone to sacrifice his son. Our walk through the season of Lent bears many similarities. We see a loving Father. We see an obedient Son. We see the promise God gave to Abraham, but this time we see it fulfilled.

On another mountain, called Calvary, the Father unleashes his righteous anger and wrath against his own Son. The Son suffers the agony of hell itself before he bows his head and dies. In this case, there is no one to restrain or to stop him. This time, the tears are ours. Jesus did nothing to deserve it, we did. Without Jesus, that hell belonged to us for every time we failed to keep God's commands, for every time we put anything before God in our hearts and lives. But the Lord provided an alternative. The Lord gave us a substitute. The sinless Lamb of God is offered in the place of sinners. We stand aside and watch. Now we understand why Abraham would give up anything and everything. Now we gladly offer our best in worship to him. Now we know how wonderful the promise really is: the Lord will provide.