

June 28, 2020 Meditation

4th Sunday after Pentecost

“God Will Provide”

Genesis 22:1-14

Rev. Darwin G. Edwards

Greeting friends on this 4th Sunday after Pentecost. May we pray together?

Dear Lord, we praise your Name for there is no other God, but you. We thank you for the blessing you have bestowed upon our lives. We pray for those in despair as well as those who spread your joy among one another. May the Scripture lesson for today be a blessing upon our hearts. I pray that my words will be your words. In the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.

Hear now the Old Testament lesson for today:

Gen. 22:1 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.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.”

Wow! Did you hear what I just read to you? What’s your feeling on this passage? Is it your favorite Old Testament story? Is this Divine child abuse? Many throw down their Bibles after reading this story and are reluctant to pick it up again. There are others who use it either to justify their agenda or some skewed disturbing protest. It must not be read lightly, but deeply.

Many theologians claim it to be the most important story in the Book of Genesis. What's the purpose of this event in Abraham's life? What does it mean for Christians today? Abraham lived in a time where many ancient cultures believed in child sacrifice. Listen to Exodus 22: ²⁹*"You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. ³⁰You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me."* Therefore, many believed that sacrificing a firstborn son appeased God. Though animal sacrifices were practiced as early as Genesis 3:21 and 4:4, the Mosaic Law later clarified that human sacrifice was to be abolished by substituting animals and their blood for the remission of sin. Before I go on, let me be abundantly clear: "GOD NEITHER CONDONES NOR DEMANDS CHILD SACRIFICE!"

Christians, label this passage as the "sacrificing of Isaac." Jewish Scripture calls it "The Akedah, the binding of Isaac." It exemplifies one of the most important tenets of the Jewish faith. Much of our understanding of this story depends upon the age we think Isaac may have attained. Was he a little boy, an adolescent or a strapping young man? It is believed that it was written during the Exile, when the Jews had lost everything. They looked upon this story (that had been orally passed down) for comfort in knowing that God would provide. There have been many books on this passage and much debate. On vacation two years ago, I read *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* by Shalom Siegel. It was neither light reading nor one I would suggest for vacation. I found it interesting, yet not likely to make the New York Times Bestseller List. I wanted to pull it from my bookshelves to refresh my mind on this passage, but my shelves are bare as we have packed and shipped all of my books to our home in Sedley.

It is very interesting to follow the story of Abraham and Sarah. It begins with his genealogy at the end of Genesis 11. Their story unfolds beginning with Chapter 12. Today's pericope begins with the words: *"After these things God tested Abraham."* Just prior in Chapter 21, we are told of the birth of Isaac and his interaction with Abraham's first son, Ishmael. Sarah became upset with Ishmael and Hagar, her servant, Ishmael's mother, Abraham's concubine, and convinces Abraham to banish her. Reluctantly he obliges Sarah.

Then comes the stinger. *"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."* God commands him to do the unthinkable, yet Abraham only responds "Here I am" and obeys. Three days later as he, Isaac, two servants, a donkey, fire, wood and knife follow God's directions, Abraham sees his destination from afar and leaves behind the two servants and the donkey telling them that *"we will worship, and then 'we' will come back to you."* Abraham either believed that Isaac would return with him or he wanted to calm them, as well as Isaac. Abraham placed the wood on Isaac's back and took the fire and knife himself. *"So, the two of them walked on together."* Then Isaac inquires about the 'elephant in the room.' *"Where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Abraham said, God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. So, the two of them walked on together."* I believe that Isaac had faith in Abraham and his father's God, as the Bible doesn't relate any emotion from either of them.

Upon arriving at the destination, Abraham builds the altar, lays the wood on it, binds Isaac and lays him upon it and obedient raises his knife to slay Isaac. No word of either Abraham or Isaac flinching. As the fatal wound is about to be delivered, the angel of the LORD intercedes at the right moment. *“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.”* As the father looks up, a ram for the sacrifice is provided by the LORD.

Why did God need to test Abraham? God deemed him righteous by his obedience to leave his land, take his family and journey to an unknown place merely by believing. God was making a great investment in him and had great plans, not only for Israel, but for all nations. Abraham would be blessed so he would be a blessing to all nations and his descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand and the stars of the sky. As Abraham’s journey progressed and Sarah remained barren, his belief in God’s promise began to wane with the passage of time. His trust in God showed signs of deterioration. Twice, he referred to Sarah as his sister to save his own life. Since Sarah had not borne a son, her trust in God suffered so she provided Hagar, her servant, to lie with her husband to produce a son. Both Abraham (Genesis 17:17) and Sarah (Genesis 18:12) laugh when God promised a son. Throughout, there are indications that Abraham still doesn’t quite trust God to accomplish what he promised, or believe that God is a God of his word. Should God continue to depend upon Abraham to accomplish or should he prepare another?

God needed to discern whether Abraham trusted and obeyed the ‘Giver,’ or whether Abraham only cherished and coveted the ‘gift.’ This I believe is the essence of the Akedah – the binding of Isaac. Dr. Kathryn M. Schifferdecker in her commentary on this passage (quoting from Jon Levenson’s *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*) states: *The story of the Akedah makes a claim on us: All that we have, even our own lives and those of the ones most dear to us, belong ultimately to God, who gave them to us in the first place. The story of the Akedah assures us that God will provide, that God will be present. And, of course, as generations of Christian interpreters have seen, it foreshadows the story that forms the foundation of Christian faith – the story of the death and resurrection of the beloved son, David son of Abraham, son of David, Son of God.”*

At some time in our lives, each of us could possibly lose all that we have, someone dear to us or something that is very important in our lives. The story of the sacrificing of Isaac should provide solace and hope. Trials, temptations and tests are a part of our lives. God is not the one who provokes us, but our faith and trust in God is sufficient to overcome the wiles of the Adversary. God is in control. God will provide. God’s promise are true and they can be trusted. Our God is an awesome God and the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit cannot be overcome. Thanks be to God. Amen? Amen.

Now for a personal word.

As Wanda and I depart Mount Jackson and Quicksburg, we experience great loss, yet a wonderful blessing has become our inheritance. I don't wish this to be superfluous (as are my sermons), because I know that I will become very emotional. You have become a loving, supportive complement to our lives. We have been blessed with friendships that we will cherish the rest of our lives.

Together, we have fellowshiped at gatherings and fundraisers. We have welcomed new members into our churches through, baptism, transfers and professions of faith. We monthly gathered at the rail to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. We observed the liturgical seasons with special services and activities. We have celebrated the joining together of several couples in holy matrimony. We have celebrated the lives of many as we grieved together at funerals. We have supported our members and community with those in rehab, assisted living facilities, retirement centers, Memory Units as well as those cared for at home. As a unit or singularly, we continue to provide yardwork, home repairs, ramps, financial assistance to members and neighbors. You continue to support our Health and Welfare Fund that provides assistance to those who fall between the cracks of social or government assistance. We have persevered together in repairs to our churches and the parsonage.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to upset all of our lives. Many of us have not seen each other for almost four months. We've relied upon written correspondence, social media and the telephone. In recent days, Wanda and I have been blessed with cards, letters, gifts, calls, texts, emails, visits and personal testimony. We have been taken out to dinner, dined in your homes and been blessed with a goodbye dinner and breakfast. It's been overwhelming.

We have found love and support among you. You have been willing workers. You continue to live through the changing times locally and internationally. Just as in today's Old Testament Lesson, we must continue to trust God above all else. The glib expression, "we know not what the future holds, but we know who holds the future," holds special meaning for all of us. While I planned to retire, God had other ideas. As many of you know, I have been called out of retirement (which I really won't experience at this time) to serve my home church, Grace Memorial United Methodist for one year. I ask you to pray for Wanda and I as we will continue to pray for you.

As Pat Sperry always says, "Don't say goodbye, say I'll see you later." So, Wanda and I are not saying good-bye, we're saying 'see you later.' We pray that it will be sooner than later. You are always welcome to visit, call or text. However, remember that Wanda and I were your pastoral family from July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2020. Rev. Elfie Finn-McKenzie is NOW your pastor. Pastor Elfie, brings forty years of experience into your parish. Her experiences have prepared her to serve you during this time of racial injustice and the current health crisis. I know that you will love her as you have loved Wanda and me. Give her the support you have given us and volunteer to be a part of your present and future ministries. Blessing to each of you. May all your efforts be according to the will of God and not for personal aggrandizement.

Peace, love and hope to each of you. For it is with much love and appreciation that Wanda and I depart in peace to continue to serve God in the next opportunity. So, we say, "see you later" – we love you. Amen!