

“God Does Provide”
Genesis 22:1-18
Pastor Dan Graham
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North Presbyterian Church

My wife and I are family care-givers for my Mother-in-Law. Mother is the widow of a Presbyterian minister as well as the mother-in-law of another, so she seemed interested when I told her last Sunday was to preach today. She asked me what I would be preaching about, and I told her the passage in which Abraham nearly sacrifices Isaac. She looked puzzled for a moment, then said “That’s a difficult passage. Why would you choose that one?” She’s not the only one to call it puzzling. One scholar referred to it as “one of the most challenging in all scripture.” Another spoke of it as “among the most odd and most compelling in the Bible.” So listen carefully:

Genesis 22: 1-18

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ 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.’ 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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 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.’ 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. 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?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.

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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ 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.’ 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. 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.’*

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.’

God tested Abraham, the text says; and there's no getting around it: this was a test. Abraham and God has been through a lot together. When Abraham was 75 years old he and Sarah were told to pack and leave home to travel hundreds of miles on foot to a place to be designated later. Several times he was promised that he would be the Father of a people, that his offspring would lead to many, many descendants who would be blessed as the People of God and who would in turn be a blessing to the world. But after years of waiting, there was no baby in the nursery. Sarah suggested that Abraham have relations with the servant girl, Hagar, and that led to a son named Ishmael, but the voice of God said this child was not the fulfillment of promise. So, when Abraham was pushing 100 years old and Sarah was not much younger, the promise was repeated and, in fact, a child was born. Then there was tension between Sarah and the other mother in the household, so to make peace at home Abraham ordered Hagar away. That took place in Genesis 21, so it had to be on Abraham's mind.

Now, the voice of God announces that he's to take Isaac, his only remaining son, and hike to the top of a far-off mountain and sacrifice him there, a gift to the Almighty. Scholars suggest Isaac was about 13 or 14 when this took place, *bar-mitzvah* age. So when most Jewish parents are getting used to telling their sons, "today you are a man," Abraham was off to sacrifice his. My Aunt Lillian passed away last November, just 5 days short of her 99th birthday. I didn't think to talk with her about this passage before she died, but I am guessing that Abraham and Sarah – perhaps especially Sarah – did not believe there was any chance there would be more children of promise in their house. It surely must have looked as if God's last chance to keep the promise of a people and a future was about to be done away with in a moment, on a far-away, windswept mountain.

What must Abraham been thinking and feeling? What did he tell Sarah his plans were on this trip? What did he mean when he told the servants to wait where there were and that he and Isaac "will come back to you"? Was that a deliberate deception? A lie? Or was he deceiving himself? And what must have passed through his mind when Isaac said, here is the wood, and here is the flint for starting a fire, "but where is the lamb for [this] burnt offering"? Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb;" what did that mean? Did he really did not intend to slaughter his son? If so, was this whole episode play-acting? Or did he expect that Isaac would be restored to life? Had such a thing ever happened before? Or was this, too, some sort of deflection, or deception? I have children, and so do many of you. What could this experience have been like for Abraham?

Isaac is believed to have been about 13 or 14 years old at this point, *bar-mitzvah* age. Abraham and Sarah were well over 100 years old. I'm sure Sarah could tell Abraham if he didn't already know it: there would be no more children of promise in their house. Isaac was the last and only chance. Was God really this close to giving up on this promise?

God himself will provide, Abraham said. God will provide. The language is ambiguous. Literally it means, God will see to it. God will see the way through this puzzle. The questions are troublesome, and God is the answer. God will see to it. God himself will provide. And that is exactly what the story says happened. God did see the way through it. God himself did provide the answer. Good for God, and good for old Abraham, who was able to return home with his son, his only son, whom he loved.

Martin Luther once read this Genesis passage to his wife Katy, at their home. Katy was outraged. How could God do demand such a thing? How could he put Abraham through that, and what about

Sarah? How could God demand so much from Abraham? And Martin looked up from his Bible and said, "But God has done it." Yes, he has done it. It is done.

Think about it: The sky grows dark, the wind blows hot and dry off the desert. A young man walks up another mountain, another "Moriah," another place to remind us that God will see it through. This young man is driven by this God who demands everything, *everything*. And who stops at nothing. This young man doesn't carry sticks for a fire on his back, but a cross. Like Abraham, he is obedient to the end, obedient to this God who is determined to have his way with us, no matter what.

This is not the namby-pamby sort of God we often talk about in places like this. This is a real God, a God who means business. This God could blow a person up, or end the world. But this God has a plan, a promise. **God himself will provide.**

That's what Abraham said, "**God himself will provide.**" God has provided, the gospels say. As Jesus himself said, "It is finished." Amen.