

What God Asks of Us
Texts: Matthew 10:40-42, Genesis 22:1-14
Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – June 28, 2020
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Here we have, again this Sunday, another difficult text from the book of Genesis. During the week, I went back to see if I had ever preached on this Scripture. I was trying to find some way to reconcile what was being asked of Abraham by God with what is being asked of us in these days. Indeed, I did preach on this text – June 29, 2014. That sermon was from the perspective of Isaac. A young child not knowing and questioning what his father was doing and why his father was doing it.

This morning, however, I want us to look at the story from Abraham’s perspective. What is he asked to do for his relationship with God? After everything he and Sarah have been through, as we have read these last two Sundays, now God is going to put him to the test like this? I do not know about you, but this might have been my breaking point. God and I would have had some words if God had said to me what He has said to Abraham. And I have wondered this week about Sarah’s reaction to this test from God. Did she know about it? Did she have anything to say about it before Abraham and Isaac went off to the region of Moriah? Maybe that is just one more question to add to my list for when I get to eternity.

“Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.’ Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.”

It was just in the last chapter that Abraham was forced to send his firstborn son, Ishmael, and maidservant, Hagar, away permanently. Now just as Abraham and Sarah are catching their breath and starting in their “new normal,” God comes to Abraham and asks him to sacrifice his only remaining son, Isaac. Early in the morning, Abraham gets up and starts to put into action the necessary steps to carry out that for which God has commanded. God commands, and Abraham obeys.

I find that I want more from this part of the text. Were there no questions from Abraham for God? At the very least, why? Why does my son have to be sacrificed? Why do you have to put Isaac – and us – through something like this? There was not even mention of Abraham calling God out on this one. “OK, God, that is enough. I cannot – I will not – do this. You have asked too much of me and my family. What on earth are You thinking with this one?” And there is not even Abraham asking for something else. “God, I have done everything You have asked of me. But in this case, is there not another way? Let me sacrifice something else for You – let me give up something else. Just please do not take my son.” There is none of that. Abraham obeys, gets up, and begins the journey toward Moriah and the sacrifice of his son.

Although Abraham did not have questions, Isaac certainly does. He realizes as they are traveling along that there is no lamb for the offering. Everything else is accounted for, but Isaac notices that there is no animal to be offered up to God. As I preached six years ago, I imagine that conversation may have included more than just that one simple question. I see it going like this: “But, how will God provide? Where is the lamb going to come from? Are you sure about this, Dad? I mean, I don’t see any sheep around here, so God must be going to get it from somewhere.” I can only imagine that this must have cut Abraham to his core. Yet, he remains steadfast and continues on the journey toward Moriah and the mountain.

They reach the place where God had told Abraham to go, Abraham leaves behind the servants and travels up to the place where he builds an altar. “He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.” God, at this moment, intervenes. “Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” Abraham was all in – there was no hesitation. When God saw Abraham’s willingness, God intervened and stopped him. God affirmed that Abraham’s heart was in the right place – that he feared and revered God more than anything else because Abraham would not even withhold his son from the Lord.

It makes me wonder – and at the same time, it troubles me. What would I have done in the same situation? Would I have been “all in” like Abraham? I feel like if I had been strong and faithful enough to get to the point of building the altar, my hand would have hesitated and stopped, hoping that God would break through. And in a larger sense, this text, as troubling as it might be, calls into question how far we are willing to go for God. How far is too far for each of us in our faith lives? What is the most we would be willing to sacrifice – to give – to offer to God before we drew the line in the sand? What would we absolutely refuse to give up – and withhold from God? For Abraham, his choice was clear. For us, I wonder if there are limits to our faith.

In response to God’s faithfulness to Abraham, he does offer to God in gratitude. “Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord Will Provide.’ And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.’”

The Lord will provide. Certainly, Abraham must have known that before he was tested in this way. Certainly, God could have given Abraham another way for him to come to this realization. But that is not what we have before us. Despite the troubling nature of this Scripture text, the truth of God remains. The Lord will provide. The Lord may call us to give up that which we hold nearest and dearest, but in the end, He is faithful. He will provide. Abraham learned that and was able to show his gratitude by offering a ram in sacrifice to the Lord.

The Lord will provide – He has provided – for us. There is so much uncertainty right now with where we are headed. Will we really be closed through the end of the year? Will there be a resurgence or second wave of the virus that will cause everything to shut down again? How can the church sustain without the use of our building – without being able to be together? These are all questions that I have asked over the last four months – and I am sure that many of you have asked these questions as well.

Friends, God is in control. God is at work and moving in our midst, despite all that is happening around us. The Lord will provide. I have often thought about the Spanish flu pandemic in 1918. What did the church do? How did the church deal with it and remain strong? The answer then, as well as now, is that the Lord will provide. God is with us. God cares for us. Let us take comfort in that truth. Let us pray...

Loving God, we admit that we do not understand this one. How could You ask such a thing of a father like Abraham? Why this kind of test? Yet, we thank You that Abraham was faithful – that he did as You had asked of him. And we thank You even more that You provided a way out for him and Isaac. Lord, You provide for us – for our families – for our church, and we are so grateful. Help us, we pray, to be willing to not withhold anything from You but to give You our all. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.