

## Providence Provides

Genesis 22: 1-14

*Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 26<sup>th</sup> June 2005*

Genesis 22 is one of the most theologically demanding texts in scripture. This is not an easy text to wrap our hearts and minds around. Maybe you don't want to, which I would understand, especially on a sultry Sunday morning. This story unsettles all our ethical sensibilities about what is moral or isn't. It questions our notions about God – or what we expect God to be or do. Yahweh's demand of Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac just seems outright lunacy. It doesn't make any sense. Bob Dylan (who, by the way, received an honorary doctorate from St. Andrews University last year) captured this sense in one of his songs, "God said to Abraham, go kill me a son./ Abe said, Man, you must be puttin' me on."<sup>1</sup>

You'll recall that in chapters earlier Yahweh promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, whose inhabitants would be like the sands of the shore (Genesis 12). Yahweh first appears to Abraham as a strange and alien deity, as the God who gives a future. In Genesis 18 (which was the lectionary text just two weeks ago), Yahweh appears to Abraham and Sarah to tell them that within the year their first son, Isaac, would be born. And even though Sarah mocked God for such a ridiculous claim, it came to pass that Isaac was born. Another generation was born to extend the promise. Yahweh is preparing a future, offering life.

But now Yahweh summons Abraham and asks him to do the unthinkable. The God who offered life and promised a future is now the God demanding death and closing off the future. What's going on here? Has Yahweh withdrawn the promise? Are these two different images of God or the same God with a split personality? Martin Luther (1483-1546), troubled by this text, said this is a "contradiction with which God contradicts himself." John Calvin (1509-1564), with his piercing insight and clarity of prose, gets right to the heart of the problem: "The command and the promise of God are in conflict."<sup>2</sup> The command to kill Isaac is in conflict with the promise of many descendants. How can there be a contradiction in God?

For our overly rational minds, such a contradiction would be grounds to give up on a God. But not for Abraham, which is one of the reasons Kierkegaard (1813-1855) could say, "No one was so great as Abraham and who is capable of understanding him?"<sup>3</sup> Apart from Jesus' capacity to trust in the divine will, there is perhaps no one in scripture with the tenacity of Abraham, whose complete trust in and obedience to the word of Yahweh makes him great. Abraham understood himself as one addressed by the otherness of God and knew that his very existence was grounded in obedience to the word that called him into being. To be addressed by Yahweh is to know one is grounded in *another*, the only *other* one can obey or trust. Abraham's life is not his own, it belongs to God and God will do with it as God pleases. There is radical obedience and complete trust in Yahweh – even though Yahweh appears to be on drugs at that particular moment. Abraham doesn't understand what is being asked of him. He doesn't

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Dylan, "Highway 61"

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 188

<sup>3</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (1843). This work by Kierkegaard is a theological paean to the faith of Abraham, with particular attention given to Genesis 22.

understand what God is up to. But Abraham also knows he cannot disregard the summons. With every summons there is a response. With every call there is an answer.

In fact, this entire story is built around summons and response. Look at the structure of the passage, identified by the leading Old Testament scholar of our age, Walter Brueggemann.

*The Structure of the Passage – Genesis 22:1-12*

Series 1	Series 2	Series 3
Summons by God (v. 1)	Summons by Isaac (v. 7)	Summons by Angel (v. 11)
Abraham's response (v. 1)	Abraham's response (v. 7)	Abraham's response (v. 11)
God's command (v. 2)	Isaac's question (v. 7)	Angel gives release (v. 12)
	<i>Abraham's statement</i> (v. 8)	

From *Genesis* by Walter Brueggemann, John Knox Press, 1982.

First there is the summons by God, Abraham's response, and then God's command in verse 2. Second, we have the summons by Isaac, Abraham's response, followed by Isaac's question. In the third, there is the summons by the angel, Abraham's response in verse eleven, and then the angel gives release. However, note that verse eight stands out from the flow of the story. It doesn't fit in this summons and response exchange; does it? It falls outside the normal structure of the text, which means it is noteworthy. There are many places throughout scripture where this is done. It means, pay attention. This is the key verse for the whole story: "*God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.*"<sup>4</sup>

Now, on the one hand, this verse really doesn't tell us how it's going to turn out. On the other hand, the verse tells us exactly how it is going to turn out. What Abraham said was true, but he didn't know how true, how literal he was being. Will Isaac become the lamb or will there be a lamb? What will happen? We know how it ends, but Abraham didn't. And by the end of the story, we really don't know why the command was made in the first place, why the lamb was offered instead. We don't know what Abraham and Isaac talked about on their way down the mountain. There are no easy answers for this demanding text.

Maybe that's the point. Just as the name of God – Yahweh – cannot easily be grasped (for it can be translated, "I am who I am, I was who I was, I will be who I will be."), just as the name of God for Israelites is so holy that it is unpronounceable, so holy that this God cannot be precisely named, cannot be controlled, cannot be tamed, so, too, we find here further

<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, p. 186. Throughout the sermon, I am in many places heavily indebted to Brueggemann's masterful commentary on this text, pp. 185-194/

demonstration of the kind of God we encounter in the Bible, a God who is not easily named, or controlled, or tamed, a God of apparent contradictions. I say, 'apparent,' because that is the view from our perspective, which is small and limited and usually selfish. Maybe the story is given to stress the contradictions, as a creative, literary way of making the point that this God is not like you and me; as the great theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) reminded us again and again, God is "Wholly Other." Like Jesus, this image of God causes us to stumble, it is scandalous to sense and reason. It inflicts existential shock as it reminds us that our ways are not God's ways, because *God is God* and we're not. What we find here is the truth that God's ways are inscrutable – and we have to learn to live with this. The contradictions cannot be explained and cannot be explained away.

At the center of our belief as Presbyterians is the sovereignty of God. God is God and God will be God. God is sovereign. God is free to do as God desires in a way that God desires. No one can limit the freedom of Yahweh. As Brueggeman notes, "God is not a logical premise who must perform in rational consistency."<sup>5</sup> If you're looking for a rational God in scripture, you're in trouble. But we also believe as Presbyterians that the one who is sovereign is inherently gracious and faithful and will provide a way. Yahweh's ways are inscrutable, but reliable – and so Abraham goes up the mountain with Isaac.

It's not easy to believe this way or live this way today. In this age, we are taught to rely upon ourselves, our sophistication, our wealth, and our resources. In many ways God is an afterthought who is generally called in to rescue us after we've exhausted all our resources. Sometimes our images of God don't demand much of us. So when we hear about Abraham's faithfulness it causes us to question our own ability to really trust in the provision of God. This is the test. And there is testing involved here. We don't like to talk like this today, that God would actually test people. But it is tough to read scripture with integrity and omit it. The purpose of the testing is to see whether or not we mean what we say about our faith. In other words, a single God, Yahweh, insists upon undivided loyalty, which means if we are going to trust in other gods to provide for us, then our trust in Yahweh is questioned. "You shall have no other gods before me (Exodus 20:3)." What are the competing gods of our age? Self, family, community, nation, ideology, wealth, just to name a few. It is so easy to find easier, less demanding alternatives to God than Yahweh, the God of Jesus Christ, who had a lot to say about limits of self and family, community and nation, ideology and wealth in securing life, true life.

God understood as provider and tester requires considerable faith on our part. Look at Abraham. Abraham's faith was grounded in God's providence. The word 'provide' here in verse eight (and fourteen) means "to see." This is linked with the English word 'providence,' with its Latin root, *pro-video*, "to see before," "to see to," "to see about."<sup>6</sup> The providence of God will see to our care and concerns, can see ahead, can see to our needs, will provide. Yahweh is the provider. But in order for us to remember this, we are tested. Yahweh is the tester, who wants to see if we are really depending wholly upon God to provide, or are we building our future on our own resources. Now, when we hear of 'test,' we might think of school, studying for a test and worrying about the possibly of failing or not getting an 'A,' of being left out or left back. It's not like that. If we are not up to God's testing, this doesn't

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, p. 191.

change the fact that God still cares for us. Many times we fail the test, fall back upon our own resources, preferring the known to the unknown. When we fail, we are still under the care of God's providence. The testing is done within God's good care to help us grow.

The testing is for us, to learn how to trust in the providence of God. Brueggeman observes, "God provides giving good gifts which cannot be explained or even expected."<sup>7</sup> There is always an open-endedness when it comes to God, when in God's providence we are provided with grace that cannot be explained or even expected, when we are the recipients of gifts which cannot be explained or even expected, when all of a sudden, like the disciples on that first Easter morning, we are given a future after giving up all hope.

The testing occurs in our personal lives on many different levels. But it also occurs here in the church. This community is called to rely upon God for the resources to accomplish the things that God asks of us. One of the greatest challenges in any congregation, especially this one, is its association with money. A church can learn a lot from the business world, but a church is not a business and when it operates as such it has sold its soul.<sup>8</sup> When we look to budgets and bottom lines to tell us what we can or cannot realistically afford, instead of trusting God who cares little about what is 'realistic,' then this is a crisis of faith. After reading Genesis 22, do you think that God is really interested in what we think is realistic? God calls us to be hilarious givers, to share what we have, and trust God to provide for our needs. That's why the thought of tithing, giving 10% or more of our income is so scary, because it is too much of a sacrifice, it is unrealistic. Whatever you give is between you and God, whether it is 2, 5, 7, 10 percent or more; but don't think there is not a test involved. Will we trust God to provide or will rely upon our resources and play it safe?

Last fall I preached a sermon entitled *Daemonic Diversions* about money and the church.<sup>9</sup> You might have thought I was crazy (one visitor that day commented that it was the craziest sermon he ever heard). Maybe I am a little nuts, but I still believe it is true. We worry about money too much, which means we spend less time talking about faith and mission. Money becomes a diversion. It is easier to talk about money, compared to talking about the things of God and following Christ. Often, when couples argue over money, the argument is not usually about money, but something deeper they don't want to talk about. The same thing happens in the church. But what if we discovered that this church has more money than it thinks it has, has an abundance of resources to be shared for the greater good? What if we didn't have to worry about money and focused on faith and mission? What if we acted like providence provides?

Providence provides. Ruth Shipley joined this church in 1938. She was a quiet, reserved woman who was active in this church and grateful for its ministry. Before she died in 1992, she created a trust to care for her daughter, Dorothy, who had some emotional problems. Dorothy died in March 2005. Last week, the attorney for the estate informed me that a provision in

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<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> "The bottom line objective of a business is *money* (profit and asset accumulation). The bottom line objective of a congregation is *ministry* (accomplishing God's goals by living out Jesus' Great Commandment and Great Commission). Herb Miller & Lyle E. Schaller, co-editors, *The Parish Paper: Ideas and Insights for Active Congregations* (May 2005).

<sup>9</sup> November 14, 2004.

Ruth's Last Will and Testament stipulated that if there was any money left in the estate when Dorothy died half would go to the Catonsville Lion's Club and the other half to Catonsville Presbyterian Church. Our share from the estate will be approximately \$151,000. The check will probably arrive tomorrow.

Providence provides. But the provider will also test us. Jesus said, "The one who can be trusted with little will be trusted with more (Luke 16:10)." We've been entrusted with this amazing, generous gift; can we be trusted with it? How will we use it, along with all of our resources? How will we be creative, imaginative stewards of this gift from God, which doesn't really belong to us. Will we live as people who really believe that providence provides?

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