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Jun

## God Will Provide

Forming a Family/Preparing a People

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

When Scripture makes us want to flee, learning to stay, pray, sing, and tell the story faithfully.

### REFERENCES

Genesis 22:1-14

Psalm 13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:40-42

### COLORS

Green

## Preaching Notes

**Focus Text:** [Genesis 22:1-14](#)

Many years ago, I was a young pastor on the staff of a large church. I remember a debate I had with another member of that staff about this text. It was while I served the church that the adoption of our son came through, and we were living in the glow and haze of being new parents. Suddenly, this story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac hit a little differently. I shared some of those feelings in a staff meeting, and my colleague said he believed Abraham knew the sacrifice of Isaac would not happen. That is the only way, he said, that this story made sense to him.

I didn't quite know how to process that idea, to be honest. It changed everything, it seemed to me. It would be like the Docetic heresy that claimed Jesus didn't really suffer on the cross, that he only appeared to do so. It was a "seeming." Abraham seemed to be offering up his only son, the son he

loved, because he knew it wasn't real. I understand that, to make sense of a text like this — far from our cultural experience — we have to find ways of interpreting it that give us some peace. My colleague had opted for the interpretation that it was only an act. Abraham was acting out something here, perhaps allowing God to end child sacrifice, perhaps modeling total obedience.

Knowing seems important to the text, however you choose to interpret it. “What did Abraham know?” is an important question. But we could also ask, “What did God know?” I know that sounds ridiculous, since we hold to the omniscience of God, that God knows everything. But Genesis 22 seems to argue differently. As the voice of God stops Abraham from using the knife on his son, the text gives God's words as “now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen 22:12 NRSV). “Now I know” — as in he didn't before? As in, this was a test, and God was being tested as well as Abraham?

Abraham's track record hasn't been great, frankly. Yes, when God called ten chapters ago, Abraham didn't waver; he just went. Dragging along extended family and as much wealth as he could gather, he went. At the beginning of this chapter, Abraham doesn't argue, doesn't waver; he just goes. But in the middle, things are a little messy. There is the Hagar incident. There is the passing off of Sarai as a sister rather than a wife, and we can't help but wonder who he was trying to protect. So, yeah, maybe he did need to pass a test to be the launch of a new plan of redemption for all of creation. But this seems ... harsh.

Even Jewish interpreters approach this harshness with some distance. While in Christian scriptures, this text is titled “the sacrifice of Isaac,” the rabbis have consistently named it “the binding (“the akedah”) of Isaac.” They are more accurate, we could argue, because while Isaac was indeed bound, he wasn't sacrificed. There was that last-minute reprieve, a pardon from the governor before the switch was thrown.

There is some debate as to whether child sacrifice was actually practiced in the surrounding nations and cultic groups. But it certainly seems possible. Maybe the intention was to establish that child sacrifice was not an accepted practice among the people of God. But then why not make a decree about it? Why this charade of a ritual killing? It's true that we haven't gotten to the law-writing stage of development for this nation-to-be. But this seems a good place to start.

If we could set aside questions of blame, as in whose fault is it that we are even here, and recognize that horrifying things happen on an all too regular basis, then maybe the message is that God is with us and that solutions, even for impossible situations, can often be found if we take a moment to breathe and to look. The message we cling to is that God will provide. We cannot always know

how and with what, but we can trust that, through means that may seem miraculous or simply the people of God being who they are called and gifted to be, God will provide.

I have consistently declared that it is not the preacher's job to explain God or to excuse or defend God. Our honest confession is that we don't know what all this means or how we are to live with this text. So, what do we do then? While most of the time it seems best to take texts from the Hebrew scriptures on their own, perhaps this one needs a Christian lens through which we can look for meaning and even hope.

Isaac carries the wood for the sacrifice on his own back. When he asks his father where the lamb is, Abraham's cryptic response is, "God will provide the lamb." The pathos of this verse is heavy with the realization that Isaac was indeed provided through miraculous means. But for us Christians, the sentence echoes through the centuries to another mountain, not Moriah but Golgotha, where the son carried the wood for his sacrifice and then became the lamb that was slaughtered. We cannot read this text and not see that terrible grace, that horrifying beauty, opening a door to salvation for all.

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