



Sermon of June 27, 1999



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"THIS IS A TEST"

Genesis 22:1-14

I Corinthians 10:6-13

Our text for this Sunday is from the Book of Genesis, the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac. It is one of the most powerful, profound, and disturbing stories in all of the Bible, and all of literature, for that matter.

It is the conclusion of the story of Abraham, and therefore it cannot be understood apart from the whole story of Abraham. The story of Abraham is the story of a promise. The promise was given to Abraham, and to Sarah, this childless couple, that they would be given a child, and that their descendants from this child would be as numerous as the stars. And the promise was also that they would be given a land, and the land would be inhabited by their descendants. That land came to be called the Promised Land, because it was based on the promise that was given to Abraham.

What's more, Abraham and Sarah are to trust that God is able to give what he promises. So they are to leave behind the life that they have been living, a prosperous life in Ur of Chaldees, and to start a new life as nomads, leaving everything behind, trusting only that God keeps the promise.

We are to read the story of Abraham and Sarah as our story as well. For all of us, deep down, know what that promise means. We all know that we have been given a promise that life is supposed to be good for us. Look at little children. It is just wonderful how they greet each day with expectation. They journey into this world with great anticipation. In time they begin to dream about who they will be, and what their life will be, in the wonderful world that is waiting for them. The world for them holds a great promise.

As we grow older we may narrow our expectations, but we still believe in the promise. We still believe that life is supposed to be good. So when we read that Abraham received a promise that life would be good, we know what that means. The story of Abraham and Sarah is the story of our life.

According to the story, Abraham and Sarah received the promise when they were old. Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah was 65 years old when the angel first visited them and told them they were going to have a baby. They wait twenty-five years for the angel to return and tell them, now is the time, and Isaac is finally born to them. Abraham is now 100 years old. Sarah is ninety years old. We are supposed to conclude from this that Isaac is the gift of grace. Isaac is a gift from God, a miracle. We know that Abraham and Sarah could not possibly, through biological means, produce this child. It is a gift to them.

You see, life hold great promises. But the fulfillment of those promises comes from God. That's the point of the story. And that is what Abraham and Sarah are called to trust in their life, that all the gifts given to us come from God.

We wish that the story of Abraham could end there, an old couple having a baby. The promise is fulfilled. There will be descendants now. The descendants will be as numerous as the stars, as the promise stated. But the story doesn't end there. We must come at last to the 22nd chapter, where God says, "Abraham, 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 a mountain of which I will tell you."

We are not to think of child sacrifice here. The Jews never practiced child sacrifice. This is a theological point. We are to understand what happens here in this scene in the context of that famous phrase, "The Lord has given. The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The command to sacrifice Isaac is a test to see if Abraham really knows and trusts that our life is in God's hands. God is the Creator of life, not us. That is what it means to say, "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The same message is throughout the Bible, but most beautifully in the 90th psalm.

Lord, thou has been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought

forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God.

And then this,

Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

That is what our life is like.

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

That wisdom we are to get is: "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away."

Or the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament. Particularly the parable of the Rich Fool, who built barns and filled them to insure his future. When he built his last barn, and he knew now his future was secure, insuring him of modest immortality, that's when God said, "Fool Tonight your soul is required of you."

"The Lord gives. The Lord takes away." That is the first lesson of biblical wisdom. And it is the first step in living a successful and meaningful life, to know that God is God, and not you. Therefore all that I have, and all that I am, comes from God.

The opening line in the 22nd chapter is this: "After all these things, God tested Abraham." The fulfillment of the promise of life comes from God alone. Now Abraham, and eventually each one of us, you and I, will be tested at some point in our life as to whether or not we believe that, that all things come from God. Can we live in the faith that the God upon whom we depend is in fact trustworthy?

That's the test. That is the ultimate test for any one of us. Are you able to let go of everything in the trust that the Lord will deliver on the promise? That is the meaning of the sacrifice of Isaac. Do you trust God, who gives the gift in the first place, can give it again?

Martin Luther rediscovered this radical, biblical understanding of faith, and coined the phrase, "We are saved by our trusting in God's grace alone." But he also wrote a hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," in which he illustrated what this kind of radical faith means.

Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also.

Which is exactly what Abraham was called to do at the beginning of the story, to "let goods go." He was called to leave Ur of Chaldees, leave all his possessions, and travel the world as a nomad, trusting in God alone, that God would lead him to the fulfillment of the promise. Then at the age of 100, at the end of the story, he is called to "let kindred go." "Abraham, 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 of which I shall tell you."

The story has a happy ending after all. Isaac is laid on the altar, Abraham fully prepared to carry

out the command. Then the voice of God intervenes, saying, "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 behold, there was a ram standing by. Abraham took the ram, and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son."

Then comes the last line, and the most important line in this story. Abraham named that place, "The Lord will provide." Which is what he was asked to trust from the very beginning. He was tested over and over again to determine if he could believe, "The Lord will provide." The God who gives us life in the first place, is able to give it to us again.

I read this story, and I tell you, I don't come to it willingly. It is such a difficult story. But when I read it again, I thought of the ways you and I are tested. Can we really believe that the God who has given us life in the first place, can give it to us again? If we lose all that we have, all the things we surround ourselves with, the things that bring us comfort, the things that bring us security in this life, the things that bring us pleasure in this life upon which we become dependent for meaning, purpose, and beauty in our life, can we let them go?

I thought of that as I saw pictures this past week of Serbs looting the homes of Muslim Kosovars, those refugees who fled their homes during the purge. There was a picture on the front page, a van loaded with possessions taken from the home of somebody who had fled the country in fear. When that family returns, whoever that family is, they will come back to nothing. And perhaps not even to a house, since it is the practice often in looting to burn the house down after the looting takes place. They lost everything.

Or, the immigrants who come to this country, whom we assist under the leadership of Gene Wenger in this church. We know they have nothing. They have left everything behind. We gather furnishings, and other things, in order to help them get a start here in this country. But they have left everything behind.

Or, those who have lost everything, as many of our parents and grandparents did in the great depression. Maybe some of you here this morning as well had that same experience, and you had to start all over again, with nothing.

I have been privileged to know many of those people, those who have lost their future, everything that they worked for. It is just amazing. They say, "The Lord will provide." And I am amazed.

I read an article the other day, written by a man named Paul O'Brien, who reflected on those who have experienced these tremendous losses in their life. He focussed particularly on literary personalities, and how they coped with it. He talked about William Thackeray, whose manuscript for a novel had been inadvertently destroyed by a servant. And who, upon hearing the news, simply sat down and started writing again.

Or a Chinese scholar, Zhu Guangquan, who painstakingly translated Hegel's philosophical works into Chinese. Then during the "reign of terror" his house was taken over, the manuscript confiscated. He announced that he would simply start translating again.

O'Brien marveled at this, and concluded that what Thackery and Professor Zhu have in common is the realization that their lives belong to a larger purpose. And that while we are responsible for what we do, we are not responsible for the outcomes of what we do. We cannot control what happens to what we do. That belongs to a power that is greater than ourselves, who in the words of the great hymn, Old 100, "Without our aid he did us make." And without our aid, he can give us life back again.

I think Jesus was thinking of the same thing when he said, "Whoever comes after me must deny himself." I think he was asking us to sacrifice the self, like Isaac, in the trust that God would give us our lives back again.

T. S. Eliot wrote that half the harm in the world is done by people who want to feel important. That's the problem. We want to feel important, we want to be somebody. There is nothing wrong with that. We are all born that way. We want our lives to have significance, but we can't trust that the meaning and significance of life can be given to us by grace. We try to seize it. We try to control it to make sure that we will receive it. We try always to have the lime light. To always be important. Just as it is hard to let material things go in a culture that equates possessions with value and worth, so it is hard to let the ego go in a society that equates losing with failure. The models that are held up to us in our culture are the models of people with oversized egos who talk about me, me, me all the time, without apology and without embarrassment. It is just amazing.

That is why I love that story about Muhammad Ali, who was on airplane. The flight attendant said to him before they took off, "Please fasten your seat belt." He said to the flight attendant, "Superman don't need no seat belt." The flight attendant said, "Superman don't need no airplane either."

We just finished the NBA finals. There is a similar lesson there. The team that can play humbly is the team that is probably going to win. Remember, the Chicago Bulls won six championships. It was amazing. But they could not win one when they had just one superstar. When that superstar humbled himself, and played to make other people look good, then they won.

It is the same this year. The wonderful team, the San Antonio Spurs, won because they could let each other share in the spotlight.

I remember when Al McGuire was coach of Marquette University. They won the NCAA championship the year that Butch Lee played for Marquette. McGuire said that one day he took Butch aside, this extraordinarily gifted player, who had difficulty sharing anything with anybody else, and he said, "Butch, the game is forty minutes long. If you divide that between two teams, it means that each team has the ball about twenty minutes. There are five players on each team. That means that each player has the ball about four minutes. Now Butch, I know what you can do with that ball for four minutes. But what I don't know is what you are going to do for the other thirty-six minutes. Can you let somebody else have the ball?"

Can you let your life go? Can you decrease so that somebody else can increase? Are you mature enough? That is what the Bible means by faithful. Are you mature enough to trust that if you let your ego go, that you will still shine? If you let somebody else star, will you still find life.

If you sacrifice the self, do you believe the Lord will still provide?

Then the most difficult application, letting go of somebody you love. It is no accident that one of the tasks of grief work is called "letting go," because that is what has to happen if you are going to have life again. It's like Isaac. You've got to let him go if you are going to receive your life back again.

When somebody close to us dies, a part of us dies with that person. We want to hold on to that person because we believe that the promise that life holds for us is tied up in our holding on. We don't really believe that life can be good again without that person. We ask, "Why did this thing have to happen to me? Why did God do this?"

And there is no easy answer. Just as there is no easy answers to why God had Abraham sacrifice Isaac. We don't know. And it is best that we not pursue that, not speculate upon it. Because the text that we read this morning is not designed to answer that question. It is designed to make one affirmation only: we are to trust the Giver of the gift of life, and not the gift itself. So if the gift is taken away, the Giver remains. If God gave life to us once, he can do it again.

So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord Will Provide." Maybe not the way we want. Maybe not the way we desire. But the Lord will provide. The Lord will give life again. Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you." But he also said, "Not as the world gives do I give to you." That means, the Lord will provide, but maybe not in the way that we anticipate. But he will provide at some time, and in some place, and in some manner, that we least expect.

Maybe like this. James Angell, a Presbyterian minister, was awakened on Saturday night, in the middle of the night, with a phone call. It was the Saturday before Easter. The phone call was the Highway Patrol telling him that his twenty-one year old daughter, Susan, has been killed in an automobile accident. Susan was on her way home. She was going to spend Easter Sunday with her mother and father. She was killed on the way home.

With courage and with faith that I can only marvel at, Jim Angell, just a few hours after receiving that news, entered his pulpit on that Sunday morning, and preached on the victory that Christ has given us over death through his Resurrection.

Later he wrote a book about those days, a beautiful little book called, O Susan! It is a book that would be a help to other people as they try to make their way through that same dark valley. He said that there is a long period when the loss is almost more than you can bear. It is like you are at the end of the rope, and you have to tie a knot on the end of the rope so that you have something to hold on to.

Then, he said, something happens. He warns that it will happen in different ways and at different times to different people. But for him it happened this way. A dear and trusted friend came into his study one day, and talked bluntly to him. He said, "Jim, you've got to face this. For the rest of your life this is a fact that you just have to live with. You can do two things about it. You can use it, use your fresh depth of feeling to make life finer, or you can let it crush you, and go through the rest of your life whimpering.

Angell wrote that those words from his friend reminded him of the words of the hymn, "Shun not the struggle, face it. 'Tis God's gift." Not the accident. That's not God's gift. Not the tragedy. Not the sorrow. That's not God's gift. But the grace, the power to use those events to make life deeper and richer, that is the gift. When Jim Angell finally realized that, he let his daughter go, and found his life again.

The end of sorrow comes when we can trust that no matter what happens to us, "The Lord will provide."

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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