

God Provides (or You Did What?) The Faith of Abraham, the Faithfulness of God

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YEAR A • PROPER 8 • TRACK 1

Genesis 22:1–14

Psalm 13

Romans 6:12–23

Matthew 10:40–42

A. D. 2014, Sunday, June 29th

☞ 8:00 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, Kansas

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The Sermon

2269 words • ?? minutes

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.
Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our hearts and see through them.
Take our souls and set them on fire. *Amen.*

YOU DID WHAT?

You did *what*?
You have *got* to be kidding?
I can't believe you would *do* such a thing.
Are you *insane*? Have you completely lost your mind?
Why would you even *think* of doing such a thing?
Because God told you to?
Are you kidding me?
You are insane!

This is how I imagine Sarah to have responded when Abraham and Isaac returned home from their little camping trip, and Isaac just happened to let slip that Dad nearly sacrificed him as a whole burnt offering. Because you know that Sarah had absolutely no idea, not even the faintest hint of an idea, as to what her husband and God were up to. Had she known, there would have been no camping trip, no father-and-son weekend on Mt. Moriah, or anywhere else for that matter. And Abraham would have spent a night or two on the couch for even contemplating such a stupid idea. As it is, I think Abraham probably spent many a night on the couch after the Moriah incident. He may have even spent the rest of their married lives on the couch. That would explain why they never had any other children.

GENESIS 22 IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

But all kidding aside. Today's reading from Genesis is one of the most remarkable and powerful stories in all of Scripture.

The 'Akedah in Jewish Tradition

Known in Jewish tradition as "the 'Akedah," or "the Binding of Isaac," this story played a central role in the theology and writings of the early Jewish rabbis, especially in the traditions surrounding Jewish martyrs.

The Binding of Isaac in Christian Tradition

Jesus is, of course, a Jewish martyr, and the early Church saw many parallels between his death and the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Just as Abraham offered up his only-begotten son as a sacrifice to God, so God offered up his only-begotten son for the sake of the world. • Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice; Jesus carried his own cross. • In the OT, the land of Moriah is connected with Jerusalem (2 CHR 3:1). So, the binding of Isaac and the crucifixion of Jesus were thought to have taken place on the same mountain. • Isaac is saved because a lamb took his place; the world is saved because Jesus takes its place.¹

The Binding of Isaac in the New Testament

However, in the New Testament, Abraham's offering of Isaac is not linked with Jesus' death. Rather, it is used to illustrate the nature of faith,² and to present Abraham as a model of faith.³

But is this faith, or just some sort of extremism? After all, he tried to kill his own son. If someone attempted that today, we would be calling Child Protective Services. Is God really calling us to emulate Abraham's faith? If so, then maybe we're not too sure we want that brand of faith. After all, isn't that why some of us became Episcopalians, so that we wouldn't be expected to do crazy things in the name of faith?

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

But let me suggest that Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac is, in fact, a masterpiece of faith; it is a perfect portrait of faith. Not a portrait of a naïve and simplistic faith, but of a vintage faith, a faith that has matured with age and experience, a faith that has known success and failure; a faith that can move mountains, but also a faith that does not shatter when those mountains fail to move; a faith that is ultimately rooted, not in who *we* are, but in who *God* is and how God has revealed himself to us. I would suggest that deep down, Abraham's brand of faith is the faith that we all long for. So let's look at it.

¹ In the end, the covenant that God makes with Abraham is so that all the nations of the world might experience God's blessing. Likewise, the New Covenant that Jesus establishes through his blood is intended to encompass (or, incorporate, embrace) all peoples everywhere.

² Esp. James 2:14–24.

³ Esp. Hebrews 11:8–19.

Abraham's Faithful Silence

Sometimes faith speaks, sometimes faith questions, but sometimes, as in today's story, faith remains silent. God calls to Abraham, and he answers very simply, "Here I am." Then, when God commands him to, "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," Abraham remains silent. He asks no questions; he makes no objections; he utters not a single syllable. Remarkable! Not only because the circumstances are what they are, but because it seems so out of character for Abraham.

If we had the chance to read the ten chapters of Abraham's story leading up to today's, we would discover that Abraham is not one to shy away from questioning God's plans. For example, when God discloses his plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham questions the justness of it,

Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked.... Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just? (18:23–25).

The LORD concedes, saying that he will not destroy Sodom for the sake of fifty righteous persons yet, Abraham continues to press the issue. "What if there were just 45 righteous persons, would you destroy it then? What about 40, or 30, or 20? Or, what if there were just 10?" So Abraham is far from quiet when it comes to defending the innocent of Sodom and Gomorrah, whom he doesn't know. Why, then, does he remain silent in the face of God's command to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, who is himself innocent and also undeserving of such a fate?

Abraham's Faithful Obedience

Not only is Abraham's silence remarkable, but so is his obedience. He does exactly what the LORD commands, without hesitation, without delay. He doesn't wait a month, a week, or even a few days. Instead, he and Isaac make an early start the very next morning. How very different this is from the Abraham who, prior to this incident, often took matters into his own hands.

When the LORD first called Abraham and Sarah, he promised to make them into a great nation, by blessing them with *land* and *offspring*. Yet no sooner are they in the Promised Land, when situations arise that threaten the fulfillment of both promises. When the promise of land is threatened by a severe famine, Abraham and Sarah head south. They sojourn in Egypt for a time. Abraham is afraid though. He thinks the Egyptians are likely to kill him and take Sarah because she's so beautiful. Instead of trusting in God's provision and protection, Abraham convinces Sarah to pretend she's his sister. The plan backfires, however, as Sarah is taken into Pharaoh's harem. Yet, despite their lack of faith, the LORD rescues Sarah, and they return safely to the Promised Land.

I should mention, that despite all the problems this stunt causes, Abraham actually tries it on one other occasion. It doesn't work then either.

Later on, there is a perceived threat to the LORD's promise of offspring. When Abraham and Sarah were first called, they were seventy-five and sixty-five years old respectively. Ten years later, they still have not produced any children. Convinced that the LORD has prevented her from conceiving any children, Sarah offers her Egyptian slave-girl to Abraham as a surrogate. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, whom Abraham and Sarah treat as the promised heir. Once again, they have taken matters into their own hands. Nevertheless, fourteen years later, when Abraham is a hundred and Sarah is ninety years

old, she gives birth to Isaac. So, again despite their lack of trust, the LORD fulfills his promises in his own way and in his own time.

THE SECRET OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH — GOD PROVIDES

So as we have seen, Abraham is not known for his silence. Rather, he is known for taking matters into his own hands. Instead of trusting and waiting patiently for God to act, Abraham often runs on ahead in a desperate attempt to secure his own future. So, given Abraham's spotty track record of faith, his unquestioning obedience in today's reading strikes me as all the more remarkable. But add to this the fact that God commands him to sacrifice Isaac—his only son; his beloved son; his Isaac. The promised child. The one that Abraham waited twenty-five years for. *Twenty-five years!* If there was ever a threat to the fulfillment of God's promises, this is it. Yet, he says nothing! And he does exactly what God commands him to do! How do we explain this? What has happened to Abraham? Is he insane? Is he having a senior moment? He is, after all, over a hundred years old.

No, it is faith. But where has it come from? And what is it made of? The clue to the secret of Abraham's faith can be found in his response to Isaac's question. As they are traveling up the mountain, just the two of them, Isaac turns to his father and says, "We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (cf. GEN 22:7). Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (22:8a). "God will provide," says Abraham, "God *himself* will provide." Or more literally in the Hebrew, "God will see to it; God will see to it himself." And God does. God does see to it. God *does* provide. And *that* is the secret to Abraham's faith. *God's* provision; God's faithfulness.

In other words, the secret to Abraham's faith is not Abraham, but God,... God who made himself known to Abraham and Sarah, by choosing them, by blessing them and providing for them, and by continuing to provide for them, even when—in fear and desperation—they attempted to bypass God and provide for themselves by taking matters into their own hands. That's what we mean by God's faithfulness. God never abandoned them. God remained faithful, even when they didn't.

Abraham is a model of faith because his faith finds its origin in God. More to the point, Abraham is a hero of faith because his faith is only his, because it has been *given* to him by God. Abraham's faith is not of his own making; it is of God's making. God gave him faith, and God formed faith in him. Abraham's faith grew and matured because it was planted and tended by God.

Of course, Abraham played a vital role in the development of his faith, as do we. When faith comes to us by the grace of God, it does not come fully formed. Though faith comes as a gift, we can't just stick it on a shelf. We must stretch it and exercise it; we must take it out and put into practice. Otherwise, it will remain immature and ineffectual. But where do we begin?

One place to begin is by developing and living out of the awareness that God provides. This, I think, this explains Abraham's quiet confidence in today's story. He had finally come to that place where he knew in his gut that God provides. But this awareness does not come easy, as the stories of Abraham and Sarah illustrate. It's hard to see that God provides, especially when we are so busy trying to provide for ourselves, when we are so focused on securing our own futures, or the futures of our children.

Our lives can easily become driven by securing college funds or retirement plans. It is easy to become anxious about changes in our jobs, changes in our health, or changes in our world. We want

so much more than our daily bread because, we don't live in the awareness that God provides and will keep on providing. So we need to cultivate this awareness.

But again, how do we go about doing this? As you might imagine, I have a suggestion. Actually, I have an assignment. Each day this week, I want you to take a few moments and recall one time in your life when God provided for you, be it miraculous or ordinary. I want you to write it down. And then, I want you to tell someone, anyone—a friend, a neighbor, a stranger, your children, your grandchildren.

Why? Because we need these stories. We all have stories of how God has provided for us, but we don't tend to live out of this awareness, not in our frantic and chaotic world where everything competes for our attention. So we need reminders. We need reminders of who God has been, to hold onto these stories of our faith through which God revealed himself to our ancestors, and to hold onto our own stories of God's faithfulness.

You see, what we water with our attention grows. What we water with our attention grows. So when we focus our attention on God's faithfulness, in our lives and in the lives of others, our faith grows, even in the midst of suffering and hardship. And as faith matures, by the grace of God, it begins to bear the fruit of quiet confidence, which knows how to trust God in every situation.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*