

Genesis 22:1-14  
Psalm 13  
Romans 6:12-23  
Matthew 10:40-42

Proper 8A  
St Thomas, Medina  
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### God Provides

I know that your bulletin tells you Lex is our preacher today. But I got a call from Zonnie last night around 7, and it turns out Lex has a bit of a bug. While Zonnie and I were talking, I got on-line, went to the lectionary page and looked at the gospel... we almost always preach from the gospel, right? And today's gospel is quintessential Matthew, quintessential Jesus and quintessential St Thomas. It's all about welcome... "Piece of cake!" I thought. And then I looked at the other readings. "Ah well, there's no getting around that Genesis reading" I said to Lex. "God will provide" I said. It's what Abraham said too.

I will never forget the first time I really heard this reading from Genesis. The reader was the father of a 3 year old daughter and an infant son. He was a beautiful reader, a regular on the lector rotation and someone who could make scripture come alive through his interpretation. Nothing was amiss as he made his way to the lectern. But it took longer than it should have for him to begin. And while he stood at that lectern and read, tears began to well up in his eyes and roll down his cheeks. He continued the reading through his tears, til its end, and as you might imagine, by then, we were all in tears. It was impossible for this father even to contemplate sacrificing a son without weeping, let alone proclaim that story for the rest of us. This is a hard story.

This is one of those stories that tempts us to say that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament, a story that tempts us to say that God is a manipulator, planning and dictating lives from afar. It's one of those stories that gives the unbelievers lots of fuel for their fire – after all, who wants a god that asks us not just to give up that which is most precious and beloved in our lives, but to be the very ones to destroy those things? This is a hard story. And still, it is our story, and so we need to do something with it.

It will not work to see this story through our own cultural lenses. We need to remember the lives this story was made of and the lives this story was spoken in to. And we need to remember that they are not our lives today. This is a story from a time when people knew far more about sacrifice than we could begin to imagine. A story of people living in a world where human sacrifice was a regular part of life. It doesn't take the sting out of it, but it helps us to understand. It might even speak to us of a God who said "This is the end of it. There will be no more human sacrifice" rather than a God who said "Sacrifice your son."

It won't help us to compare our own relationships with God to Abraham's relationships with God, either. We do not – at least I do not – have the kind of relationship with God that Abraham did. I don't even have the kind of relationship with God that Abraham's wife Sarah had. Perhaps the good part about that is that I won't be having babies at this late date! I daresay that Abraham and Sarah each had a very different sort of relationship with God than most of us do.

Listen: *Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'* *Genesis 12:1* And Abraham packed up his wife and his animals and his possessions and left everything he knew, to do what God told him to do. Does that sound like something you would do? Abraham's relationship with God was one of complete and total obedience. So if that's the case, why did God ask his obedient servant Abraham to murder his own son, the son he had been promised for decades, the son who was to be the father of nations, the son who was God's own promise?

The answer to that question is simple. I don't know. And that makes the story even harder.

You see, normally it's the preacher's job to DO SOMETHING with these difficult stories, to make sense out of them, and to offer us some way to connect them with our own lives. But you know, even if I'd been working with this story for weeks or months, I don't think I would have come up with any other answer. Why did God tell Abraham to take his son up on that mountain and kill him? I don't know. And yet there are some things I do know.

I know that God is God and I am not. As deeply connected to God as I feel, there is something of God that is unknowable and awesome and unapproachable. This makes me uncomfortable, as I am much more inclined to preach the God who is closer to us than our breath – which is also true. Yet stories like Abraham and Isaac's story remind us that God cannot be domesticated or made in our impoverished images of who God is or how God behaves. And that's hard for us.

We want to believe that God will do the right thing, that it will all make sense somehow, that everything will turn out alright in the end. We want to jump ahead to the end when God provides the ram. Or that other end, where God raises Jesus from the dead. So when we hear the story of Abraham and Isaac, we allow ourselves to hear it backwards. All the while the story is being told, we are thinking "But God provides the ram and Isaac doesn't have to die." It's a lot like the way we hear the story of the crucifixion – "But Jesus came back to life in the resurrection and that's the ultimate victory and now we can all have eternal life." While both of those things are true, if we leap to the end without engaging the hard parts, we miss something very important. We miss the very simple and stark reality that God is God and we are not. We miss the reality that God won't be contained by our need to have things in order. We miss the reality that terrible, terrible things happen, and that God is in all of it. Does that mean God wills horrific pain and suffering? I don't think so. And even more important than that, I don't think that's the right question to ask of this story. Nor do I think drawing tidy conclusions or offering pat answers is the right thing to do with this story.

To say that real faith demands real sacrifice is far too small a thing to say about this story. To say that Abraham obeyed God and so God saved Isaac, or to say that Jesus obeyed God so God resurrected him, is to miss so much of what is important. While it's true that God redeems everything, that death doesn't have the last word, that resurrection and eternal life with God are all promises God makes to us, it is also true that we are extraordinarily fragile and vulnerable creatures and that it is only by God's grace that we have breath at all. This is what it means to say that "everything we have is a gift from God." Abraham knew that. And his story reminds us that that no matter how important or powerful or comfortable or successful we are, the truth of the human condition is that we are vulnerable beyond measure and can do nothing outside of God's unspeakable grace.

It is true that faith requires sacrifice. And I think the sacrifice this story invites us to make is to sacrifice our notions about a God who can be explained or contained by mere mortals. As my dear husband Jim says, "Sometimes, the God of the Bible invites us to the great wedding feast of salvation. And sometimes, God calls us up the mountain of sacrifice. Either way, God provides. Amen.