

God Provides...What?

June 26, 2011

Whitefish UMC

Genesis 22:1-18; Matthew 10:40-42

- ✦ Have you ever prayed for a good parking space? It's not a trick question. My friend Christy from seminary, one of the most faithful and diligent Christians I know, believed firmly that God provided good parking places when she was late for an important appointment through no fault of her own.
- ✦ If you've ever had to find a parking spot at a college or university in the midst of the school year or tried to find a spot within reasonable distance to the Farmers' Market on Tuesday evenings, you know how frustrating it can be.
- ✦ Although I have never prayed for a parking space, I know I have cursed the unnamed parking gremlins who conspire against me. But you get the point. Canon Charles Robertson of the Episcopal Church writes: "I do not doubt for a moment that our Heavenly Father is intimately concerned about us, "counting the hairs on our heads" as Jesus proclaims. But there is something...too easy...about parking lot theology. Is this what Abraham meant when he said, "The Lord will provide." Does God think that driver deserves that spot more than all the others still navigating the parking lot in their seemingly never-ending quest?
- ✦ Now this may not seem to be a very impressive example, but it is a familiar one. The formula is played out in countless other situations. In its extreme, it makes God a cosmic genie, or a heavenly ATM into

which you place a quick prayer and get what you want. "God will provide!" But as the teacher and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, there is no such thing as "cheap grace," and there is no such thing as an easy out. Just look at what Abraham experienced!"

- ✦ Yes, just look. And really, we'd rather not. But I believe God calls us to chew on even the most difficult passages of the Bible, and the passage from Genesis that Lynn just read is certainly one of those. The truth is that God's word doesn't always go down easily, but still we need to ask ourselves: "What is this passage saying about God...and about our own self?"
- ✦ And so we begin this journey—up Mount Moriah with Abraham and Isaac, his beloved son.
- ✦ The story of Abraham and Isaac's tortuous journey up mount Moriah brings us to the breathtaking climax of the cycle of Abraham stories in the patriarchal history of Genesis. Whether for its original hearers or in a contemporary context, the story evokes a powerful response: awe, horror, revulsion, relief, joy, confidence—belief and disbelief—these are but a few of the human reactions to the telling of the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac at God's behest. It's a story that is reflected in art and writings throughout the ages and a story that has captured the imagination of followers of three great world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
- ✦ It was one of these interpretations that compelled me to explore this story in greater depth and to write about it in seminary. I was studying Genesis with the renowned Old Testament scholar, Phyllis Bird, when one day I was asked to read a passage in French from the bible for a worship service. I went to the library to find a French bible

and discovered a beautiful Jerusalem bible covered in red leather and filled with plates of Rembrandt's paintings of biblical texts. As I thumbed through the amazing masterpieces, I stopped short at the painting interpreting this story. I remember that it literally took my breath away. Rembrandt's rendering of the climax of the story, with its stark contrast of dark and light, its images of fear and compassion, of utter vulnerability, pulled me into the story.

- ✦ How are we to understand a God who would demand this ultimate test of faith? Could we possibly meet the test? Should we even try?
- ✦ As a child, and then as a parent, this powerful story was abhorrent to me. In my youth I thought: God asked *what* of Abraham? Is this the God who I am supposed to worship? I was a kid who joyfully sang: "Jesus Loves Me" and God was demanding that Abraham do away with his precious son. It scared me to imagine my own parents taking me into the unknown to sacrifice me to God.
- ✦ As a parent, I read the passage with even more resistance: imagine being asked to sacrifice your child, the beloved gift that you treasure more than anything else. How could I, or anyone else, ever have such faith? And what kind of God would demand it?
- ✦ The questions that the story of the *aqedah*, the binding (or within the Christian tradition—the sacrifice) of Isaac, poses are almost limitless, and I want to tell you that I don't have all the answers. I urge you to be wary of those who have easy answers to the questions that arise from this story. Nevertheless, I invite you to engage this important scripture, to struggle with it, and to know that God is in the questions and struggle as much as in the answers.

- ✦ What we can say about the truths that this story communicates is this: God sees; God provides; God is trustworthy. In response, God demands trust and obedience from God's people.
- ✦ Today I am slowly coming to grips with Abraham's overwhelming obedience to God's request, but I know I still respond with many "yes, buts" as I continue my own faith journey. In the first sentence of the narration, we are told that God is going to test Abraham. The story is straightforward: God calls, Abraham answers, and sets about to honor the demand that Isaac be sacrificed. Although the story is told with little emotion, we may experience powerful emotions as we absorb the words. And we come to understand that this is an account of abundant faith. For the outcome of the story will determine not only the life of a child, but also the future of a nation.
- ✦ When God calls Abraham, Abraham answers God three times with "Here I am", and he answers immediately. God gives Abraham the instructions to take his dear son and to present him as a burnt offering. Abraham and Isaac set out. The father cuts wood for the offering and finds the place for the sacrifice. He tells his entourage to wait. When they are alone together, Isaac implores, "Father!" Abraham again answers, "Here I am, my son." Isaac wonders where the lamb for the burnt offering is. In the essence of faith, with utter trust and confidence, Abraham replies, "God will provide the offering, my son." As Abraham takes up the knife, the angel of the Lord calls his name once more. When Abraham answers "Here I am!" God understands the depth of his faith, and Isaac is spared.
- ✦ Will Abraham trust and obey the Giver, or only adore the gift? This is the test question, says Walter Brueggemann, a noted Old Testament

scholar. At the beginning, God is the tester; at the end it is God whose trustworthiness is tested. God is found worthy of trust, and thus God is the provider.

- ✦ I don't know about you, but this summary is a little too simplistic and it makes me a bit squeamish. But what a riveting narrative—if only we could leave it behind as “Old Testament theology.” In the Jewish tradition, it is not only Abraham who is seen to have great faith, but Isaac as well. For he is old enough to understand what is going on, and he has to trust and obey his father as well. But for Christians, God goes even further by giving us another Son whose obedience is tested even unto death. Jesus' test is crucifixion; God's providing is resurrection. Here is an answer to our horrified questions about Isaac's potential sacrifice—our God does not demand such an offering from us, because it is already given by Christ's death and new life. The lamb in the thicket is now the Pascal Lamb, and we are the recipients of eternal grace. Certainly this is the traditional understanding of the fulfillment of this scripture, first articulated by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8:32 and I Cor. 10:13.
- ✦ But does that tie up the theological package a little too neatly for you? I have to admit that I find this explanation troubling still. So let's return to the start of the story, even before Abraham gathered the wood for the fire of sacrifice for the mountain altar.
- ✦ “Only a few chapters earlier in Genesis, Abraham had been promised, *yes, promised*, by God that his descendants would be as numerous as the sands on the beach, as the stars in the heavens. A very impressive divine promise, to be accomplished through Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac. And when Abraham tried to help God out a bit through his own

cleverness--conceiving a son through a surrogate, Hagar--God reiterated the divine promise and said that it would be fulfilled through Abraham and Sarah's own son, Isaac. A promise, a firm promise, an unequivocal promise.

- ✦ Now, back to the story: Abraham is told by God to sacrifice Isaac. Wait a second! What about the promise? Abraham is confronted with a real dilemma of trust. Like the long-suffering Job, here we see a righteous, faithful person who now is threatened with losing all and is still called to believe that God is the one who provides. It makes little sense. And yet three times in this story, twice in response to God and once in response to Isaac, when called, Abraham immediately responds, "Here I am!" It's not just Abraham who faces a crisis here. As several biblical commentators have noted, God is trusting Abraham as well, trusting that the relationship being built between the two is something deeper than that of genie and supplicant.
- ✦ Earlier, Abraham had dared to go head-to-head with God regarding the issue of divine judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, negotiating with God to spare the cities if a certain number of faithful people were found therein. It is not for nothing that Abraham became known as "the friend of God." Now, they would both learn how deep that friendship, that trust, really was.
- ✦ Now, it is safe to assume that neither you nor I will be called upon to literally recreate this challenge. As the apostle Paul was known to say, "God forbid!" But we are called to examine how we view God and our relationship with God in light of the very real challenges we face. Yes, "God will provide," but often such provision does not come without a cost. As Isaac's own son, Jacob, would learn during a dark night of

wrestling with God, when the dawn eventually broke through, he emerged with a blessing, but with a limp as well. And in the Gospels, a tearful, agonized Jesus wished that he could avoid drinking from the cup of suffering that lay before him on the cross. But with a sigh on his lips and trust in his heart, he said, "Not my will, but yours, be done."

- ✦ Job complained, Abraham negotiated, Jacob wrestled, Jesus pleaded. But in the end each one dared to trust, dared to believe that God could indeed be counted on to provide, especially when all seemed most hopeless. The promise has never been a lack of struggle. Ours is a resurrection hope, but this doesn't mean that we won't first face Gethsemane and the cross. Easter indeed awaits, but we will first have to go through Good Friday.
- ✦ Yet even then, even there, we are not alone. As it says in the beloved 23rd Psalm: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." We may not be able to avoid going through that dark valley, but we will cross it because God is with us. And somehow, some way, God will give the strength to make it to the other side. No wonder Jesus taught his friends to say to God, "Give us this day our daily bread; please give us what we need to make it through today." It is a comforting prayer because it is a realistic prayer.
- ✦ "God will provide." So let us be prepared to sacrifice our cleverness, our ability to get out of things, and most of all our naïve wishful thinking that somehow we are immune to the struggles and pain that faced the countless faithful who came before us. Let us instead dare to

trust that God will indeed provide...not necessarily a way out, but always a way through.”

- ✦ This year, the words that surface in the story of Abraham and Isaac on mount Moriah—words like sacrifice, obedience, trust, test—take on important meaning. These are words that apply to us and to our country. We are being asked to balance the needs of one important priority with another. We are asked to offer our sons and daughters to protect our country and bring peace in the world.
- ✦ A few years ago, during the Vietnam era, popular songwriters, including Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Leonard Cohen wrote songs on this text from Genesis decrying the sacrifice of then young men in what seemed to them a senseless war. They saw bible passages like this one encouraging mindless trust in authority, even when authority was misguided. And there are surely parallels to our world today.
- ✦ And here is the paradox: for although Abraham’s confident trust in God and his ultimate obedience to God are lifted up in the story as qualities we are to emulate, these are tests that are reserved for our allegiance to God, and not necessarily to our country or to anything else that gets in the way of our relationship to God.
- ✦ In fact, that’s the whole point of the story. **Our ultimate trust, faith, allegiance, obedience is to God.** And so, as we approach the fourth of July and its patriotic implications, what does God want for our nation? For us?
- ✦ And the answer, I think, is partly found in today’s Gospel lesson, in these words from Jesus. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me...and whoever

- gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”
- ✦ Reminder of Hagar/Ishmael/God’s providing water in the desert.
 - ✦ Christians are called to offer hospitality, love, and an alternative vision to the world. To love God, neighbor, and self—to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.
 - ✦ And so just as we struggle with the questions raised in the difficult story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, so are we called to struggle with the questions raised as we seek to respond to the events and challenges of today’s realities.
 - ✦ And so as we struggle with what to make of the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, we understand that its power alternately compels and repels us. We ask, “but what about those for whom God seemingly fails to provide?” Sometimes we see the message of the story only dimly from the distance, as father Abraham at first saw dimly.
 - ✦ We are left with God’s promise to show us the way to the mountain and to be with us along the way—to hear our cries and our silence. Our hope is that the God who journeys with us can be trusted to remain with us, even when the end of the story is less certain and favorable than it was for Abraham and Isaac.
 - ✦ For this we pray: *God of Abraham and Isaac, God of Hagar and Ishmael, God of Sarah and silent voices, we are your offspring, as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. We search for You from a distance. You call us and we answer “Here I am.” But then your voice is silent as we cry from the desert of banishment and alienation. Your promise and blessing*

compel us to trust your faithfulness. You call us, and we turn away. You test us with every step on our journey to the mountains where we will know your will. We often cannot meet Abraham's test. The sacrifice is too great, and only a God that is strange to us would ask it. God of grace and mercy, guide us and abide with us on the journeys of our lives. Remind us of your blessings, that we might be the faithful people of the promise. You love calls us, that each may answer: "Here I am."

✠ *We give thanks to you for your son Jesus, who trusted in your promise even on the cross. And we pray in his precious name, for us and for our nation. Amen.*

Sources:

Much of this sermon was adapted from my research in a class on Genesis taught by Dr. Phyllis Bird in 1998.

Rev. Canon Charles K. Robertson, TEC

"God Will Provide," <http://day1.org>