

“God Provides Alternatives”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 19, 2021

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

Genesis 21:1-8, 22:1-14

Last Sunday, we began our Narrative Lectionary journey through the Old Testament by starting at the very beginning, looking at the creation story, asking how it helps us answer the question, “What is God like?”

We have skipped over many of the best-known stories in Genesis to get to this point in the narrative: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the Tower of Babylon. In chapter twelve, God chooses one person and family through whom God will bring about the redemption of all creation; the Lord offers Abraham an unconditional promise of land and descendants; the narrative from that point on is about how the promise will be fulfilled.

In today’s first reading, we hear about how God finally fulfills this promise to Abraham and his wife Sarah; providing them – even in their advanced age – a son, whom they name Isaac, which means “laughter.” To honor this promise fulfilled, the happy parents throw a banquet.

Our reading this morning – in dialogue form – recounts the events that follow: Genesis, chapter 22, verses 1-14...

Let’s begin with this: many of you are likely horrified by this story – as well you should be. We have no concept of what it means to participate in such an act as this; we cannot relate to any religion that would demand child sacrifice. But this was the world that Abraham lived in; the gods that people worshiped in the ancient Near East demanded all kinds of offerings, including blood sacrifice. One of the takeaways could be that God was stopping this practice by saying, no more...no more children need to die.

Remember, the Bible is written to show us who God is and what God wants of us. The deeper truth of this story is that when we trust God, even when God seems to be leading us into discomfort or peril, God will provide. Once God sees that Abraham trusts God above all else, the angel / God’s messenger stays his hand and the ram, a substitute sacrifice, appears in the bushes.

Still, this is a harrowing account. We don’t want to think that God tests us; that God, who sees our hearts and knows us completely, would devise a plan to see

if we are faithful. Perhaps we are tested from time to time; not for God to see if we are trusting and believing, but instead for us to be reminded that we are faithful; so we can know that God provides not just what we need, but alternatives beyond what we often imagine.

Tests, like the ones you take in school, are meant to monitor progress: to see how much we have learned and assess whether or not we are ready to move on to the next stage of learning. It helps us identify our readiness for what will come next.¹

In this biblical test, when God calls out, Abraham responds, saying, “I’m here,” or – more traditionally – “Here, I am.” This is the same response that Moses and Isaiah will give when the voice of God calls out to them. It means not just, “I’m here” in the way we would respond when someone is looking for us from another room in our house, it means: *I am fully present and at your disposal to do whatever you tell me.* Abraham will respond the same way to his son, Isaac’s voice. We see Abraham here as fully present and committed to both his God and his family. If the test is about allegiance to one over the other, this would be for Abraham – like for any parent – an impossible choice.

One possible interpretation is that Abraham knew all along that God would provide, that his trust is never shaken. After all, he tells his servants, who stay at the base of the mountain, that both of them – he and his son, Isaac – will return. Was Abraham lying to them? Or did he still believe that God – the keeper of the promise – would provide an alternative to the unthinkable?

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, where Abraham is lifted up as a model of trust, the author says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (11:1) Abraham lived with confidence in God, trusting that God would somehow make a way out of no way. That is what God is like: the Lord who provides.²

The truth is, we do not and cannot know Abraham’s state of mind as he heard God calling his name; or when he was told to sacrifice his son; or as he walked up the mountain next to his son and then bound him and lifted up the knife, ready to strike. We are repulsed by this story because of the trauma that it surely caused. After an event like this, Abraham’s relationship with his son, Isaac never would have been the same again. Would Isaac have fought back while Abraham was tying him down? Or would he have followed his father’s lead and have faith in

¹ Leon Kass, “Theological Stew”

² John Herrin, “Passing the Test”

God? According to the biblical text, father and son never speak again. And what about Sarah, who had waited so long to have a child; did Abraham get up and leave so early in the morning to avoid having to tell her where they were going? To what lengths would she have gone to try to stop him?

Just at the moment when we are about to learn whether Abraham will pass the test, he hears his name being called out again, “Abraham, Abraham.” He answers, the same way: I’m here, fully present and available to the God who provides. The command is to stop and not to make the sacrifice, for God now knows that Abraham’s trust is complete.

And so, an alternative has been provided. A ram seen caught in the bushes is used for the sacrifice. Isaac, the son of the promise, is spared. And we realize that God has been the most active character in this story all along: God initiates the test, God learns what is in Abraham’s heart, God calls off the test, and God provides a substitute for the sacrifice.

For Christians, this episode foreshadows a similar scene, when God’s own son, Jesus, would walk up the side of a mountain, willingly, carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. But this time, God would not intervene to stop it. God would not be spared the pain of watching his son die. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son; God did this to give us new life through his own son’s death: a new covenant; a new promise between God and all creation; a promise that cannot be broken even if we try to destroy it ourselves. Jesus was the ram in the bushes for us; the alternative we can trust; for even when we were separated from God, God stepped in and provided the sacrifice so that we might live.³

Perhaps we are tested from time to time – not for God to see if we are faithful or trusting, but for us to be reminded that we can be faithful and trusting. Sometimes those tests involve being willing to sacrifice things that are precious to us. Are we willing to give up toxic relationships or situations? Are we willing to say “yes” when our usual answer is “no;” and are we willing to say “no” to something we’ve too long said “yes” to? Are we willing to take steps to limit our carbon emissions, even if other people or other nations have not made the same commitment? Are we ready to welcome refugees into our nation and our neighborhoods, even if it means we might have to sacrifice some of our space and resources? If and when God puts us to the test, I believe it is to offer us the opportunity to discover how faithful and trusting we really can be.

³ Anne Robertson, “There’s a Ram in the Bushes”

Because, the truth is, we tend to hold closest those things that are most dear to us. We hang on to the things we think will bring us security and comfort and assurance; we even thank God for blessing us with so much. But sometimes, we grip the things we have so tightly that they end up being bound on alters of our own making; and our hands tremble when we think about letting them go or giving them away. It can be difficult to take a risk and let something that we value go; to trust that it will be in good hands, even when those are not our hands.

“What is God like?” From our readings today, we hear that God provides alternatives. Even though Abraham and Sarah had reached a point in life far beyond when they expected to have children of their own, God provided Isaac, their source of laughter and joy. And even when Abraham might believe there was no other way for him to be faithful to God than to sacrifice their beloved son, God provided an alternative: a ram in the bushes. As much as we might sometimes believe that our paths have been pre-determined and choices limited, we are given options and the ability to weigh those choices to make faithful – if often difficult – decisions.

Yes, this is – at its heart – a story about what God is like; about coming to understand covenant relationships in a different way. God is sovereign creator – able to separate darkness from light, sea from sky, land from water, and make all things – and if God has the power to create, then God also has the power to destroy; to – for example – send a flood over the entire earth. And yet, in calling Abraham and making a promise with humanity, we learn that – to God – blessing is even more important than sovereignty; that God is ever-gracious toward God’s covenant partners.

The same God who provides a ram for his covenant partner, Abraham, has offered his Son, the sacrificial lamb, for us. We are, thus, given a choice: do we want to trust in the God that this gift reveals? Will we live in a way that looks at the alternatives offered us and – rather than holding on as tightly as possible – allow our decisions to be aligned with the common good; with the character of God revealed through the willing sacrifice of God’s own beloved son for the sake of humanity? When God calls out to us, will we say, “Here I am?” Amen.