

The Lord Will Provide
Hebrews 11:8-12; Genesis 22:1-14
June 29, 2008

In the 22 years in which I have been serving local churches, I have never preached on this passage from Genesis. Perhaps I managed to be on vacation or at Annual Conference – or simply chose to avoid it! It is probably the most difficult passage of scripture to interpret, but several months ago I decided it was time to take on the challenge as it appeared in the Lectionary. Last week I read and read and read, but alas, the consensus among scholars is that there are no easy answers. The story raises more questions than it gives answers. And yet, isn't that the very nature of life. When I elected to preach the book of Genesis this summer, little did I know that, like Abraham and Isaac, I would be walking through the valley of the shadow of death with various family members. It has given me opportunity to reflect on coping with the deepest challenges of life.

Ancient Jewish interpreters see Abraham's life as characterized by a series of divinely instigated tests, a total of ten. The first test was the call to leave his homeland and become a leader of a nation in a foreign land. God said, "Go to the land that I will show you," and Abraham obeyed. Other tests included a famine, the capture of his nephew Lot, Sarah's infertility, and the banishment of his first son, Ishmael, with his mother, Hagar. Through all of these tests, Abraham showed himself to be God's faithful and obedient servant.

The call to offer the beloved and long promised son, Isaac, as a burnt offering is Abraham's tenth test. When God calls his name, Abraham obediently responds, "Here I am." He doesn't yet know the assignment. He gives no verbal response to the test; he silently prepares to accomplish the task. It is a three day journey to the mountain to which God leads. Imagine what went through Abraham's mind in that long journey. In previous tests, he had bargained with God. Why did Abraham not protest this cruelest of commands? Why did he not question the promise that he would be the father of a multitude? With Ishmael banished and Isaac sacrificed, Abraham would have no descendants; God's promise would die. Would God want to be proven a fool?

I struggle with the image of God as the Tester. The God of grace I know through Jesus does not deliberately create difficult circumstances to test us. God is not setting the blazing fires that are destroying homes around our state and country. God does not initiate wars that leave children orphaned and soldiers traumatized. God did not plant the tumor in my brother's head. If such things are not the malicious acts of humankind, they are random forces of nature beyond our understanding.

While God does not inflict suffering, God does have demands of us. Ours is a covenant relationship with God in which both parties have obligations to fulfill. The focus of the present test in Abraham's life is trust. Does he trust that the God who gave him the promised child in his old age will preserve this child's life? Will he endure the agony of this mission, trusting all the way that God will provide an appropriate resolution?

God promises not to abandon us when we move through the trials and tribulations of life, but we find it too easy to abandon God. In our desire to lay blame, God is often the target of our judgment. Sometimes we fail the test, unable to hold on to even the most slender thread that will eventually lead us into the fullness of God's loving embrace.

That thread connecting us to God is there, as fragile as a strand of a spider's web, but it is there, even in times of testing, ready to wrap itself around us if we are willing to submit. In the

face of crises, when the storms assail us we have a choice: to live in fear or to live in faith. What would we do if our most cherished hope for the future was put at risk? Would react out of fear and desperately try to control the outcome on our own terms? How can we move into the uncertain future without becoming paralyzed by fear? The challenge is to cultivate the kind and quality of trust that is required to step into an unknown future.

The affirmation of faith found in this story is the phrase, “The Lord will provide.” When Isaac questioned his father asking about the lamb for the burnt offering, Abraham responded, “God will provide the lamb, my son.” The story culminates with the naming of the location, ‘The Lord will provide.’ The statement of faith is “The Lord will provide.” No matter what the circumstances, God will weave God’s presence into the midst of it all. We can step into an unknown, even impossible future, without controlling it, trusting that “God will provide.” The choice is ours: the choice between fear and faith. Fear terrorizes, leaving us empty, lost, and lonely. Faith empowers, offering strength, confidence, and companionship.

The word provide is related to the word “see.” In Latin the term would be *pro-video*, meaning “to see before,” “to see to,” “to see about.” The Lord will see what is needed by God’s creatures and God will provide. Abraham places his trust in God’s providence, in God seeing the need. Ultimately that trust enables him to see the lamb that God has “seen to.” Faith is trust that God sees our need and will provide. God will make a way where we see no way. The Quakers have a phrase that has often been meaningful to me in times of tribulation and uncertainty. The phrase is simply “way will open.” Although we may not see the path before us, the way will open. The trail will be revealed, even step by plodding step. When life tests us, as it did Abraham, we can trust that God will provide, that way will open.

Oftentimes the focus of this story is Abraham’s faith. Author Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, notes that he identifies more with Isaac, for Isaac is also a survivor. Whereas Abraham defied God, Isaac defied death. Isaac did not rebel against life. He could have wandered aimlessly in bitterness throughout his life. Instead he married, had children, and claimed the land promised to his father and his descendants.

Wiesel considers it Isaac’s privilege to be the people Israel’s defender, pleading their cause with great ability. He was entitled to say anything he wanted to God, to ask anything of God. Not because he suffered, for in the Jewish tradition, suffering confers no privileges. “It all depends on what one makes of that suffering. Isaac knew how to transform it into prayer and love rather than into rancor and malediction. This is what gives him rights and powers no other man possesses.”ⁱ 85

Two weeks ago we spoke of the meaning of Isaac’s name – “laughter.” Consider the irony of this most tragic of characters having a name which evokes and signifies laughter. Wiesel suggests, “As the first survivor, he had to teach us, the future survivors of Jewish history, that **it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.**

“Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth; the holocaust that marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh.”ⁱⁱ 86 The lesson Isaac teaches us is that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.

We have a choice about how to respond to the circumstances of life. We can allow resentment and bitterness to eat away at us. Or we can integrate our pain and suffering into our

lives. We can fearfully isolate ourselves from any further risk of injury and harm. Or we can move forward even into an uncertain future with faith that God will provide.

I am reminded of the story of Terri Jentz. With her college friend she embarked upon a cross-country bike ride. On the seventh day their journey ended tragically when both were terrorized in a campground by a man wielding a hatchet on their young, innocent bodies. Fifteen years later Terri retraced her steps to understand her near-death experience. She had an instinctual desire to put this traumatic memory into her life's narrative, which was a healing experience. She doesn't call her return journey closure, but prefers to call it integration. "There is no closure. I'm going to carry this around with me forever and the best I can do is integrate it. Deal with it, embrace it, make it a part of you, because it is, whether you choose to accept it or not."ⁱⁱⁱ

It appears that Isaac integrated his traumatic experience into his life with a deep trust that even when pushed to the limits, God provides. He shows us that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter.

When life tests and challenges us, we choose how to respond, with fear or with faith. Fear terrorizes, leaving us empty, lost, and lonely. Faith empowers, offering strength, confidence, and companionship. Faith trusts that "the Lord will provide," that God will see our needs and will make a way. Even in the face of despair and suffering, we need not abandon the art of laughter. We can integrate our pain into our lives because we know that God indeed provides.

ⁱ Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits & Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 85.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 86.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joan Morris, "Healing power of acceptance," *Contra Costa Times*, June 5, 2006, p. C1, a conversation with Terri Jentz about her book, *Strange Piece of Paradise*.

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