



“Provision At The Summit”

a sermon by

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Genesis 22:1-14

Our Scripture lesson comes from Genesis 22:1-14. Just three chapters earlier Abraham had covenanted with God to be the father of God's chosen people. Though his wife had remained barren all her life, God promised and delivered a child, Isaac, to Abraham. "After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." God said, "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 on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

The covenant promise extended to Abraham and his lineage is one that had been laid out before him from the very beginning of his adult life. Abraham is told time and again that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and rise up in victory at the gates of the enemy. Though Abraham was assured of this promise, even he was guilty of human shortsightedness as his wife Sara, at age 90, had yet to bear a child and yet God promised her that it would still be so. Perhaps not surprisingly, this promise evoked incredulity within Abraham and even laughter from Sara at such a preposterous notion. Yet God pulls through for Abraham and, as God had promised, blesses him with a child by Sara in his 100th year, and in the 15th chapter of Genesis we see Abraham fall flat on his face in thanksgiving for his son Isaac born of Sara, through whom Abraham's descendants would be as countless as grains of sand on the shore. "God has brought me laughter and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." This is Sara's response. The pattern of God's faithfulness is such that, when God calls upon Abraham in our text today, Abraham is eager to respond, "Here I am, Lord" before he is even aware of the task to be set out before him, as he has witnessed for himself God's faithfulness and provision to those who respond willingly to God's call. Abraham knows God is going to prevail, and prevail in Abraham's favor.

But now God asks Abraham for the unthinkable. "Take now your son, your only son Isaac who you love, and go to the land of Moriah and sacrifice him there." Can you imagine this call? The scriptures speak only of Abraham's willingness to accept at face value the command of God in what seems to be a rather remarkable act of faith. But I cannot even conceptualize the agony he must have faced. Abraham does not respond with what I dare say I would: 'How could you ask

this of me, God?' 'What have I done to deserve this fate, God?' 'Have you not seen all I've done for you, God?' 'Have you yourself forgotten your own promises to me, God?' 'No offense, Lord, but are you out of your mind?' Instead, he responds with acceptance, and rises early the next morning to carry out God's call. Abraham, trusting in God's faithfulness, trusting that God knows far more than he about how these things work, sets out on a road that, as far as he can tell, will end only with the death of his son. Abraham probably felt as all of us have at one time or another. Lost. Like the foundations of all we know or thought we knew about our lives have been rocked, God's promises cruelly revoked, and we are suddenly facing a reality he can hardly believe, compelled to something that cannot be justified to anyone but God, could not be prompted by anyone but God and perhaps feels like a dangerous absurdity. Though it is hardly a commission for sacrificing a loved one, I know that when I received my call to the parish, I wanted to ask God if he was sure he had contacted the right woman. Perhaps God had made a mistake. 'I'm sorry, Lord, you must have meant to call that other faithful disciple. I'm not sure what I think about this one.' Perhaps like Abraham, I'm not always concerned with having a faith that can move mountains. Sometimes I just want a faith that can simply climb them.

We don't know what was going through Abraham's mind in those moments after his enthusiasm for hearing God's call vanished as the details came out. There is no commentary in our scripture of what thoughts were surely swirling in his head.

In his lifetime Rembrandt depicted this scene in our scripture today three times in oil painting and etchings. In each scene the subject of the piece is clearly Abraham. His expressions convey the content of an internal response to this horrible call through the eyes of the artist and tell his story in a way that only pictures can. When he was 27 years old, Rembrandt painted this as a passionate scene filled with lush colors and full, sensuous figures. The background is dark and Isaac is bound, almost naked - bent backwards over a rock. Abraham's hand is pushing Isaac's head back, face covered, neck exposed. Abraham's eyes red and wide with a wild, determined conviction, his strong right hand high above his head, dropping the knife in surprise as the angel swoops down and grabs Abraham's wrist to spare the adolescent. In his mid-life Rembrandt sketched the scene as Abraham gently coaxing the young child Isaac - Isaac's arms holding a bundle of sticks for the fire, Abraham discreetly concealing the knife beneath his cloak, and the angel nowhere to be seen. Just over a decade before his death Rembrandt etched this scene a final time in striking detail. In a clearing on the mountaintop the young Isaac is kneeling upon a rock, his hands in his lap, head bowed forward. The old man Abraham is standing behind him, with his hand covering the child's eyes - an expression of deep sorrow in his dark eyes and the lines on his face. The knife is held almost reluctantly, as though it would be dropped at the mere touch of the angel - who is standing just behind Abraham in a posture that is like a deeply loving embrace - looking over Abraham's shoulder into the old man's face, and gently guiding his hand away. We know only that Abraham rose early the next morning and set his face to the mountain to which he had been called, but this is not how the story ends - leaving the reader and Abraham lingering on the threshold of a seemingly impossible task. In faith Abraham does not seek to bargain his way out of the command, or flee from the call, but takes his elderly wife's only son and embarks on the road set forth before him until the drama of his journey raises to the dangerous point of a raised knife over a child's heart when suddenly, on angel's wings, there is ... delivery. At the moment Abraham had most feared, had to have most feared, an angel calls out, "Abraham! Abraham!" And he replied, "Here I am!" And God tells Abraham, don't do this thing - I have seen your faith and I have provided for you, for look, caught just now in the bushes behind you is a ram - a ram that is a

suitable sacrifice to your Lord.

The gravity and wondrous timing of this moment deserves pause. There was no ram when Abraham arrived at the scene. There was no ram as Abraham arranged the wood for the altar, laid his boy down, bound him, or took the knife in his hand. The ram had not arrived. The ram was working its way up the mountain. But in the time it takes for Abraham to raise his hand against his son and for the angel to intercede, a ram arrives at the summit and is caught in a thicket of bushes - perhaps surprised by them as he had yet to free himself in time to be saved from the sacrifice. This is not a haphazard coincidence as the angel admits to a test - admits this child is not the sacrifice that is to be made on this summit. God knew it all along and, more significantly, God had set grace and provision in motion long before Abraham uttered his first "Here I am, Lord." Abraham could not see the provision because it was working its way up the other side of the mountain. But he was so assured it was there, so certain of God's faithfulness, that he followed through with his grievous task until it brought him to the brink of destruction. He stayed the course of faithfulness only to find that what he had feared, the worst that he had imagined was thwarted by God - for God had something much greater in store. Something much more hopeful than perhaps even Abraham would dare to have hoped for: that all along God had in mind a different sacrifice. But it was up to Abraham to walk forward into that terrifying, open-ended promise of God and find for himself what God had in store even if he feared the worst. It is as the Psalmist writes, "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act."¹

The story of Abraham is not unique in the Bible - perhaps it is in its drama and the miraculous nature of its timing but not in its message: That God is a provider well beyond human understanding, and is working behind the scenes of all that we will ever see. The pattern of God's faithfulness is not unfamiliar. Throughout the Old Testament we read of the chosen people - the first children God claimed and called to carry the Word of God to the world, who were saved from captivity but then called out into the wilderness with no provisions in sight, only to be supplied daily bread in manna from the sky. But the call of God's people to faithfulness continues, and throughout the books of the judges and the kings, the road traveled by God's people became increasingly hopeless as they struggled for a grasp on righteousness. There is wickedness - rape and murder, increasingly immoral leaders, perversions of the law. And, just when it seemed things could not get any bleaker, on a winter's eve, a baby is born. A baby that would change the shape of the journey's end in a way that no one in history had ever seen before. Rulers overthrown by a child that would grow to teach that we are to trust in that which is hidden by the obstacles we face, that which we will only receive at the summit of our journey when we set out on those most difficult paths to which we are called. Jesus himself was that provision which was working its way up the other side of the mountain for all of God's people, and would prove to be the sacrificial lamb at the summit of humanity's darkest journey. For us - unsuspecting, undeserving humanity, God would lay his son on the altar.

In Jesus' life itself we see another telling of this Abraham story - we see, in fact, the ultimate embodiment of the promise of God's faithfulness. One evening in an ordinary garden called Gethsemane, Jesus laments his call but responds in trust. He is abruptly betrayed, tried, beaten, and crucified - executed at the hands of sinners. His body wrapped in the funerary cloth

¹Psalm 37

and sealed in its grave. All hope that he was the Messiah was dashed - every expectation that he could have been the one Whom Israel had awaited for so long, destroyed. Jesus was dead. No angel had arrived to intercede. The show was over and even the disciples had gone home to grieve. But again the story does not end here - not even when the sacrifice had been carried out, for in three days time, in God's time, while the eyes of the world were still fixed upon the blood-stained cross atop the hill of Golgotha, God's provision came marching up the other side of that mountain. And shocked the world - the ram of resurrection appeared on the scene and by God every hope for provision and new life was fulfilled from that day forth and forever. As God's people are taught again, only this time through the realization of their greatest fears, and the disappointment of their highest expectations. That when we surrender our fear to trust in God's faithfulness, the Lord will provide with a grace beyond expectation because the ram is always on its way even when all signs point to the contrary, even when there is no possible way we could see it coming. That's the whole point! And so we need not be locked in the agony and fear of what lies ahead, but live and breathe and love and risk and sacrifice and grieve as a people of hope.

The apostle Paul was the first writer to turn this witness of Abraham and Jesus into a theological teaching for the community of faith struggling down so many seemingly hopeless paths. He writes to the Corinthians, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."² Faith is not about playing the odds, or setting aside provisions in case God doesn't pull through, or exhausting other options to see if we might somehow substitute God's direction for our own, or being certain we have seen all that God has left to show - and thus placing a period in our lives where God has placed a comma. For salvation could not be bought by any other way than complete surrender to the call. As Walter Bruggerman notes, "Faith is nothing other than trust in the power of the resurrection against every deathly circumstance. Abraham knows beyond understanding that God will find a way to bring life even in this scenario of death. That is the faith of Abraham. That is the faith of the listening community. And that is the meaning of the ram at the last moment. A substitute is not brought by Abraham but given by God in his inscrutable graciousness."³ Oh, what a great work of faith, to surrender to this unknown, to live in anticipation of this inscrutable graciousness. For surely Abraham wanted nothing more than to grasp Isaac in his own two hands and never let him go. But he was challenged to surrender and experience first hand, again and again, the provision of God. Perhaps this act is what Reformer Martin Luther had in mind when he said, "I've held many things in my hands and lost them all. But that which I placed in God's hands I still possess."

What are the mountains you face today, and what do you fear is on top? What journey has been set in motion for you and how do you, will you, or have you chosen to respond? 'God, I've worked too hard - there are too many bills, too much debt.' 'God, I have been so faithful, what have I done to deserve this?' 'Not me, God, you've got the wrong faithful disciple.' Or, 'Here I am, Lord. Whatever it means, whatever it takes, here I am.' Abraham said this. Jesus lived it. And through these witnesses and countless others we as Christians know what it means to surrender our destination to it fully. It means knowing what Abraham and Jesus did - knowing

²1 Corinthians 10:13

³ Walter Bruggermann, *Interpretation*, Atlanta, John Knox, 1982, p. 193.

what they could not see and yet that which they were shown, that which we may cling to and rejoice in, that God is leading our ram up the other side of our mountain. That there is provision at the summit. Hebrews 11 tells us, “now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible ...” What we cannot see but can trust is that which God has already set in motion to meet us in our darkest hour ... and to redeem us. God meets our sin with a Savior - and scripture testifies that when our provision is not yet in sight, it is because it is not yet time for it to arrive. But as Christians, we can have faith that God has in store for us what we cannot hope to imagine, that along our path we never know what is journeying up the other side of the mountain along trails unseen. But we can know that our God is a God who is faithful to his promises. From a lonely cross to provision at the summit of our most foreboding journeys. All we have to do is find the courage to respond to his call and seek strength to take each step along the way. “Here I am, Lord, send me.”