

**Summer Worship Series: “Beginnings”**  
**God Will Provide**

Third Sunday after Pentecost  
29 June 2014—Sermon Text: Genesis 22:1-14  
FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

“Anxiety is the rust of life, destroying its brightness and weakening its power.

A childlike and abiding trust in Providence is its best preventive and remedy” — (Tyron Edwards).

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I deliver this question today: “why this story?” Hear the Genesis text:  
22 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ 2 He 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.’ 3 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. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 5 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.’ 6 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. 7 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?’ 8 Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.

9 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. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill\* his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ 12 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.’ 13 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. 14 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’ (Genesis 22:1-14).

Sometimes it seems that Abraham does little thinking for himself. From his initial call in Genesis 12 we read: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country’ . . . So Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (Genesis 12:1, 4). Today, God spoke: “Abraham . . . Take your son and . . . go . . . offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you. So Abraham rose early in the morning . . . and set out and went to the place” (Genesis 22:1-3). Clearly, we can ponder this text in many ways. Soren Kierkegaard wrote his *Fear and Trembling* based on this story. Let me address ways theologians have

considered this story. First, some suggested that if we had faith like Abraham then all in life would be fine. We dismiss this thinking on its face. It fails to respect the text, or God, or the reality of human suffering that offers us far too much evidence to dismiss. Second, some say Abraham was a product of his times and child sacrifice was routine. Perhaps, but if everyone acts wickedly, then is wickedness tolerated? Third, some argue that because God's ways are not ours we can never know. Yet true this may be it does not help much. Where do we go from here?

I want to wrap our text around a fairly practical question. The question asked at the beginning of the sermon was simply "Why this story?" But before we get to that, we need to acknowledge that the Bible has many particularly troublesome texts. One text reads "Wives, be subject to your husbands" (Ephesians 5:22) or "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42). Also we read "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10) or "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt" (Luke 6:29). What is curious about today's lesson is that it is a puzzle. Along with lessons like the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah, we simply shake our heads and wonder, "what are they thinking?" Another so-called "text of terror" reads:

**O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock (Psalm 137:8-9)!**

What makes this Genesis 22 text so toxic is that we scratch our heads when trying to figure it out. Why is it in the Bible? What does it mean for us today? What do people like us do with a text like this one? We dislike texts

like this because they reveal a part of God that we do not like to think about. We like the God that we sing about when we sing “what a friend we have in Jesus” or “and he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own.” This is our kind of God—made in our own image (see Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*); a God who does what we want when we want. Perhaps this is why this Abraham and Isaac story troubles us so—it is unbridled—it is out of our control? This is a raw and painful story—like a train wreck from which we cannot avert our eyes. Thus, we let it sit in all of its glory and discomfort. It simply offers us: uneasiness, anxiety, distress and embarrassment. I do not want to smear God or slander God, but in the telling of the story, God does not seem particularly heroic. We may get to this issue in VBS for Adults in a few weeks.

For now I want to share a book that came to my attention. The book’s title is a real attention grabber: *Play the Ball Where the Monkey Drops It*. The title offers a philosophy of life in the face of human suffering. Maybe it offers a way to find hope and meaning in suffering from whatever direction it may come.

The story is told of a golf course in India. Apparently, once the English had colonized the country and established their businesses, they yearned for recreation and decided to build a golf course in Calcutta. Golf in Calcutta presented a unique obstacle. Monkeys would drop out of the trees, scurry across the course, and seize the golf balls. The monkeys would play with the balls, tossing them here and there.

At first, the golfers tried to control the monkeys. Their initial strategy was to build high fences around the fairways and greens. This approach, which seemed to hold much promise, was abandoned when the golfers discovered that a fence is not a challenge to an ambitious monkey. Next, the golfers tried luring the monkeys away from the course. But the monkeys found nothing as amusing as watching humans go wild whenever their little white balls were disturbed. In desperation, the British began trapping the monkeys. But for every monkey they carted off, another would appear. Finally, the golfers gave in to reality and developed a rather novel ground rule: “Play the ball where the monkey drops it.”

Sometimes the monkey helps you and sometimes the monkey hurts you. Sometimes you hit a perfect shot and the monkey carries it into the rough. Sometimes you hit into the thicket and the monkey carries it and places it near the hole. Regardless, you never know how the monkey will affect your shot or your game. Life is like this.

The story of Genesis 22, the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, is a story about a God who demands all. This is certainly not a God we conjured in the imagination of our hearts! Most people in our culture want a God who gives all. The truth about the God we see revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ is a God who gives all, but also demands all. But this is also a God who demands all because this God gives all. Notice this about the text:

The Lord God 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" (Genesis 22:12-14).

"Why this story?" Two reasons I think. One to remind us that this is a story that we do not control, but rather God controls. Second, we like to think of ourselves as heroic and generous people. We are willing to sacrifice—so we think. We are willing to give up this or that for the forty days of Lent for example.

Yet as heroic as we imagine ourselves, the truth that we never sacrifice anything that God has not first given us. Just as Abraham ultimately offers a ram as a burnt offering, so too do we only give to God what God has already provided for us to sacrifice. This kind of God turns out to be far more gracious that we give God credit. After all, this God stayed the hand of Abraham when the old man was willing to sacrifice the only path to fulfill the divine promises.

Yet later, on another similarly windy mountain, in some ways like Mt. Moriah, there was another son sacrificed. It was a son who was not simply a ram, but rather the very Lamb of God. After all, a millennium and a half or so before Jesus, Abraham told his son, "God himself will provide the lamb for a



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burnt offering.” Maybe as faithful people we might turn the question around. Perhaps our question ought to be “what is God willing to sacrifice for us?” At the very least this story makes us think about hard questions of our depth of faith—in a God that we worship.

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