

Genesis 22:1-18

Lent 1B + February 24, 2021

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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God Provides the Lamb

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The temptation of Abraham lasts three days. It is not the only time he is tempted, but it couldn't be more brutal. He journeys through the wilderness with Isaac, his only son with his beloved Sarah. This is the miracle child, born when both parents were in their late nineties after decades of failing to conceive. His name means "he laughs" – he is their laughter in their old age. Even more than that, he's the child of the promise: the Lord has declared that through Isaac, Abraham will be the father of a great nation.

All of that seems in jeopardy now, endangered by God Himself. The Lord commands, "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 of which I shall tell you." Kill the son of laughter as a sacrifice to Me, says God. There's no explanation, no reason given. Just the command to obey.

Abraham obeys. He journeys with servants and Isaac, with wood and fire. One imagines that the temptations he endures date back to Adam and Eve. Did God really say that? Why? Why this? Why must it be Abraham with the knife, the father killing the son? Is God just? Is He even stable? Since God promised that a great nation would come through Isaac, wouldn't you be helping out God in His plans if you ignored this one command and kept your son alive? Isn't this a great time to argue that the end justifies the means? Can't this be done some other way?

And in amongst whatever anxious questions and second-guessing, Isaac has a question too: "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" One can only imagine how heavy is the silence that follows that question before Abraham responds, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Take away all the questions, and the temptation is this: will Abraham make Isaac into an idol? Will he fear the loss more than he fears disobeying God? Will he love his son more than he loves the Lord? Will he trust his instincts and emotions more than God's Word and promises? After all, God's promises seem impossible now: as Hebrews 11 notes, the only way at this point that God can keep His promises is if He raises Isaac from the dead.

And how likely is a resurrection from the dead?

The days of temptation are over, and Abraham finds himself standing over Isaac, his knife poised to slaughter the son of laughter. It is only then that the Lord intervenes. He says, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Along with the words to deliver, God provides a ram, its horns caught in a thicket. It becomes the sacrifice. Isaac lives. As Abraham prophesied, God has provided a lamb; and God will keep His promises. A great nation shall descend from Abraham through Isaac, and through him all nations will be blessed.

Mark this story well, and know the lesson. The lesson is not that, "As long as you have faith like Abraham—as long as you're willing to give up everything in service to God (especially the things most precious to you!), only then can you expect God to reward you and do great things through you." God grant you faith like Abraham, for He is the one who gives faith. But there is better consolation to be found here: this is not a story about your need for faith, but how far God will go to save you.

Faith clings to this: God provides a lamb. Not just the ram in the thicket: God provides the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The message of this text is not Abraham's obedience, but the Gospel. The Lord declares to Abraham, "I will spare your only son of the promise. But I will not spare My own Son to keep My promise of salvation." (By the way, note that this takes place in the area of Moriah: that's the future spot of Jerusalem, which means that Isaac is nearly sacrificed very close to a hill that will later be called Golgotha!)

In this week's gospel lesson, you see God's own Son in the wilderness. He's on His way to be the sacrifice for sin as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Rather than a three-day journey, there are still three years between our Gospel lesson and the cross. As Isaac once carried the wood for his own sacrifice up the hillside, so Jesus will carry His cross to His death – at least as far as He can. But at the top of the hill, there will be no reprieve for Jesus. God will not provide a substitute lamb in His place. You were the one who was to die for your sin according to God's command, but Jesus is the Lamb whom God provides in the place of *you*.

His temptation in the wilderness for forty days is an important stop along the way. Matthew and Luke tell you what the devil said, and the temptations are not much different from the ones he spoke to Adam and Eve, or the ones that no doubt played across the mind of Abraham: "Is this really God's will? Would He do this to You? Why? Why not opt out of this plan for one that seems better? Why not just skip the suffering, crown Yourself king and rule over the world? Why not just skip the means and go right to the end?" Throughout those forty days, Satan tempts Jesus to break off from the Father's will and promise – the devil dearly wants a blemished Lamb of God. Jesus doesn't sin, of course. He resists every temptation, remains holy and keeps heading for the cross to die on your behalf.

Before He dies on your behalf, He resists temptation on your behalf, too. Never forget that grace is more than a negative thing: not only does Jesus take your sins away, but He also gives you His own righteousness. You don't resist temptation perfectly: you're terrible at it, actually. Each time you fail to resist temptation, that sin is enough to condemn you forever. So, in the wilderness, Jesus resists temptation for you, so that He might give you the credit for His work. The Gospel includes the joyous truth that Jesus gives you His righteousness even as He takes away your sin: so when God looks at you, He sees you as sinless and righteous, and thus His holy child.

So Jesus resisted temptation for you, even as He went to the cross to die in your place. God, who spared Abraham's son, did not spare His own Son in order to save you.

Some temptations are worse than others, and Abraham's is agonizing: on the face of it, he must choose between obeying God and sparing his son. Though perhaps not as obvious or exquisite, you face similar temptations because you're not alone. You have friends and family, people who are dear to you. They're flesh and blood: you can see them and touch them. They make you laugh, they make you feel comfortable: you do not want to lose them and you do not want to be alone. This is where the devil prowls – this is where the tempter preys. If a dear one strays off course, you are slow to speak correction because you don't want to offend them. If they fall into some sin, you want to justify the sin and argue that it's acceptable in the eyes of God. If they turn to another god, it's tempting to adopt the world's idea that all roads lead to heaven. When you do so, you're making them an idol. You're eroding your faith as you compromise God's Word. You're also failing to act in love towards them, because you're not warning them of the danger – and you're not telling them that God has provided a Lamb to save them too.

It is good to work to minimize these temptations, because they are heartbreaking. You will have many acquaintances, but choose friends and spouses wisely who will support you in your faith. Work hard to train your children in the ways of the Lord while they are young, and never cease to pray that they remain in the faith. And where you are tempted to make allowances for their sin, always remember that the Lord is faithful. Always remember that God has provided the Lamb.

We've left out one important character in these temptations: you are likely not short on love for yourself. It's easy to explain your sins away, to offend God rather than deprive yourself, to accuse God of cruelty when you are given to suffer affliction. You make yourself an idol every day. We all do. It's what sinners do. So why repent?

Because the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. As He made promises to Abraham, He has made promises to you. As the Lord kept His promises to Abraham, so He keeps His promises to you. Long before our Old Testament lesson, God called Abraham and made him His own: He promised Abraham a land and that he would be the father of a great nation. What did Abraham do to deserve this? Nothing: it was all God's doing. Long before today, the Lord redeemed you from sin: well before you were born, Christ went to the cross as the sacrificial Lamb for your sin. In your baptism, God said, "I choose you to be My child." And what did you do to deserve that? Nothing: it was all God's doing. That's Good News: you don't ever have to wonder if you did enough to earn your baptism. Jesus earned it for you by His life, death and resurrection.

The Lord has made you His at the cost of His own blood, and He has promised His faithfulness to you. Between that price and that promise, you are assured that the Lord works all things for your good and the good of His people. He works all things for your good, even when it seems that He does not. You know this by faith, not by sight. This is a world of trouble – to pretend otherwise is to deny the Word of God. But within this world and its trouble, you have the Lord's promise that you are redeemed. You have the promise of forgiveness, no matter what sins you have fallen prey to. You have His assurance of the resurrection of the dead.

There will be times when you must walk as Abraham did for those three days, trusting and obedient to God's Word even when it seems to make no sense at all. But you know that the Lord is with you. You know that He will deliver you. You know this because you know that God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up at the cross for your redemption. He is the Lamb of God who has mercy upon us. He is the Lamb of God who grants us His peace.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen