

Sermon – July 2, 2023  
“God himself will provide the lamb”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Genesis 22:1-14 & Matthew 10:40-42

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words that they may be a blessing for your people, a blessing that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning! It is a great privilege to be able to proclaim God's word to a congregation that has been released from the United Methodist Church. Thanks to everyone who has worked to bring about this Sunday, a time when this congregation is now newly enabled to worship God and seek to reach into this community in Jesus' mission guided by Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. What began as the stirring of hearts over a year ago has now been completed, and we are now released from the UMC to extravagantly worship God in Spirit and truth and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the people in this community. There is more work to be done, but you have achieved a major milestone with your release from the UMC. Savor this day, breathe it in, and then reshape our prayers from the prayers we have offered asking God to make a way to prayers asking God to change us to be the congregation He would have us be. July is here and we will be out picking corn on several Tuesday mornings this month. Keep an eye on the dates in the bulletin and come along as you are able and let's pick some sweet corn. And

finally, please pray over our Vacation Bible School, asking Jesus to draw children and their families to himself through our efforts.

We are back with our ancestor Abraham this morning, looking at more of his interactions with God. There is a word in the first verse of this morning's reading that we need to be sure and catch and that word is test. When we stop and think about all Abraham has been through with God, including God's call to Abraham to leave behind his family in Haran and go to the land of Canaan, God's support of Sarah's request to cast out Ishmael and Hagar, and other times when Abraham has been tested, we might well wonder why God needs to test Abraham. We might also wonder why God, who knows the outcome of the testing, seeks to test Abraham. God tests us so that we might show ourselves faithful to God. God tests us so that any other gods we have before the Lord our God might be made known to us and set aside. God tests us to give us the opportunity to live faithfully as we seek to live as citizens of the kingdom of God. Let's look together at Abraham's testing and see what insights we might gather for our own times of testing by God from Abraham's experience.

When Abraham hears God call his name, he immediately responds with "Here I am." The Hebrew word is "hineni" and it means so much more than "here I am." It carries with it the idea of "readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instructions."<sup>i</sup> When we sing the hymn, "Here I am, Lord," we should realize the depth of what we are singing to God. When Abraham replies to God's call with this word, he is giving total surrender to the call of God. Abraham will respond three times in this account of his testing with this Hebrew word, once to God's initial speaking of his name, a second time to Isaac's speaking of his name, and a third time when the angel of God speaks Abraham's name (or shouts it) at the altar. We should think of Abraham's response to God as him saying, "Here I am. I am ready. Whatever you need, whatever you ask, I will do. Ask and your servant will act."

The first time Abraham responds to God with this reply, we might wonder about how God's instructions are received. God tells Abraham, "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."<sup>iii</sup> Think for a moment about some of the things Abraham has already done. He has left everything and followed God into the Promised Land. He has cast out Hagar and Ishmael, trusting God to care for them and to make of Ishmael a great nation. Abraham has seen God give him Isaac, the child of promise, as the first step of God's covenant

promise. Through Isaac, God has begun to move forward into keeping God's promise to Abraham to make of him a great nation that is a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Sarah's barrenness has been removed and the child of promise given. Life seems to be moving forward in a comfortable way. God's promises are being kept and Abraham is being blessed by God. And then God comes to test Abraham. What could be between God and Abraham that needs to be tested? God already knows the outcome of the test. Why does God come with this request, a request that would return Abraham to barrenness, that would end the promise of God? Why would God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son whom he loves? The text is not clear, but it seems this test begins in the night, and after Abraham hears God's request, he gets up early in the morning and begins to respond to God's request. Abraham prepares, cuts wood he will need, takes along young men for help, gets fire to start the burning of the sacrifice, finds the knife needed to kill the sacrifice, and then heads out with Isaac and a donkey carrying the wood for the burnt offering.

For three days Abraham walks. For three days he must think about God's command to sacrifice the child of promise. For three days Abraham journeys and thinks about what God has commanded, about the ending of the promise that Isaac's death will bring, and about the killing of his son, his only son whom he loves. With each step he is drawing closer to the place of sacrifice, and then Abraham sees the place God showed him and he stops. Abraham unloads the donkey, leaves it with the young men, and places the wood on Isaac. We must wonder if placing the wood on Isaac was more difficult for Abraham than when he placed the bread and water on Hagar's shoulder and cast her and Ishmael out. The day has arrived. The journey is at its end. The time for worshiping God with a burnt offering as God has commanded has arrived. Abraham climbs the mountain with Isaac.

In most translations, the next movement is framed by the repetition of a phrase, "So the two of them walked on together."<sup>iii</sup> These two phrases bracket the second time Abraham will respond with the Hebrew word, "hineni" or "here I am." As the two walk, Isaac speaks to his father, calling him "father," to which Abraham replies, "hineni" or "here I am." Isaac has been part of sacrifices before. He sees with them all they will need, the wood on his back and the knife and fire in his Father's hand, but there is something missing, the lamb for the sacrifice. And so, Isaac asks his father, "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?"<sup>iv</sup> There is no indication in the text that Abraham stops his walking or that he looks at his son with the deep love of a father.

Abraham is ready and tells Isaac, “God Himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Now there are many ways to read Abraham’s response, but two predominate. The first is that Abraham tells Isaac, his son, that God will provide the lamb. The second reading is that Abraham has just told Isaac that God will provide Abraham’s son, Isaac, as the lamb. Which of these readings we decide is correct makes a very large difference in how we understand the rest of the text and Abraham’s response to God’s testing. Scholars make convincing cases for either reading. Let me share how I currently understand Abraham’s response. Let me point out that the very next statement in this verse is the phrase that is repeated, “So the two of them walked on together.” My understanding is that Isaac asked the key question of “Where is the lamb?” and Abraham told him he is the lamb and then Isaac walks on with his father to the place of sacrifice. Notice there is no struggle as the account progresses, but there is a cooperation between Isaac and his father. Isaac either is a small child and Abraham at over 100 years old can physically overwhelm him, bind him, and place him on the wood, or Isaac decides to cooperate with his father and be the lamb. I will let you read the text and decide what you find there. I will share that I see Isaac’s response as his deciding in that instant to cooperate with God, to trust God fully, and to surrender to God. That Isaac walks on with Abraham speaks to his own response of “hineni” or “here I am” to God. However we read the text and understand it, Isaac walks on with his father and is bound and placed on the wood as the sacrifice after Abraham builds the altar.

And then we come to the point in Abraham’s testing when we will hear for the third time Abraham’s response of “hineni” or “here I am.” Notice there is no break in the narrative where Abraham stops to tell his son he is sorry, or how much he loves him, or how he must obey God, or any other words shared between them. All is ready and Abraham sends his hand, takes the knife, and begins to move his hand holding the knife to deliver the death cut to his son, his only son, whom he loves, Isaac. In that moment, when the promise of God and the testing of God hang in the balance, the angel of God calls out Abraham’s name twice, “Abraham, Abraham” and Abraham replies, “Hineni, Here I am,” again ready to act as God commands. Now God commands Abraham not to lay his hand on the boy or do anything to him. God now knows that Abraham fears God. God knows that Abraham will not withhold even his son, his only son, from God. Abraham’s “hineni,” his “here I am,” his readiness to do what God demands, is above Abraham’s most fundamental desire for love of his son, the son of promise. Abraham has been tested by God and Abraham’s fear of God demonstrates that there is not another lesser god

before the one true God in his life. He will obey God's commands at all costs, even the life of the son of promise. Abraham's faith in God, his fear of God, is not an idea; it is who Abraham is and how he lives in the light of God's calling. His response is always, "Hineni, Here I am."

Now, we know the rest of the story. Abraham lifts his opened eyes and sees a ram caught by the horns, goes and takes the ram, and offers it as a burnt offering instead of his son. He and Isaac worship God with the sacrifice of a ram on the mount where God provides. Abraham names this place simply, "The LORD will provide."

Let's move forward in time to this same mount just outside of a city that was built there later in the history of Israel, once the land is occupied. The city is called Jerusalem. Jesus is on a cross, dying from the physical effects of that torturous treatment. God's only son is about to die as the sacrifice for all people. Jesus the perfect lamb, the sinless son of God, is being sacrificed by God the Father for our sins. Here on this mount this time there is no cry of an angel of God to stop the sacrifice. The love of humanity and the love of God's son are in the balance and God must choose either to let his only son whom he loves with perfect love, a love that is beyond our grasp, die or to send the angel and stop his son's death and let humanity be lost in their sin. God must choose between his son's life or redemption of sin-stained humanity from death. There is no cry of an angel on the mount this time to stop God's only son's death. Jesus cooperates with his Father, goes to the cross, and stays on the cross to be the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world. Jesus's reply to the Father's will, his "hineni," his "here I am" is to cooperate fully with the Father's will and be the lamb that God provides that takes away the sin of the world. Jesus dies on the cross, the son of God, the son of man, dies as the perfect sacrifice. Not only did Jesus bear the physical pain of the cross but upon the Lamb of God was piled all of the sin of humanity a burden beyond weight and measure. God's love of humanity has come to this exchange and God allows Jesus to die so that we, so that all who believe in Jesus, might be reconciled to God for all eternity. Abraham is given God's provision of a ram to replace Isaac. There is no provision for God's son. God allows Jesus to die so that we might live. Paul says it so well, asking that we might have "the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge."<sup>v</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."<sup>vi</sup> God himself will provide the lamb. The LORD will provide. What God did not require of Abraham, the sacrifice

of his son, his only son, whom Abraham loved, He gives to us that we might be reconciled to God. The words of the hymn ring loud, “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life my all.”<sup>vii</sup>

One of the questions Abraham’s testing brings to us today is, “Will we be tested like Abraham was tested?” Will God come to us, speak our name, and test us to see if we love him more than these? I am convinced the answer is yes. We like Abraham have the son of promise. We have Jesus Christ, and it is through belief in Jesus that we are reconciled to God. But God tests us to exercise our faith. Think of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the Lord’s prayer. We prayed it together this morning. Jesus teaches us to pray that we might not be led into temptation. We are to ask that we not find ourselves in situations that demand us to exercise our faith and make decisions that choose between God’s promise and God’s provision.

God knows the outcome, but God wants us to exercise our faith, to put Him above all other lesser gods, to choose Him above all else. Our testing may come as the temptation to yield to the world’s passing and ever changing view of values. We may be tested if we will accommodate the world’s demands or if we will follow God. Such a test is not a place that many will rise up to and say, “Here I am. Test me. Let me stand alone against the pressure of the world.” Yet Abraham’s example leads us to the conclusion that we need to decide that we will rely on the promise of God.<sup>viii</sup> Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. The promise of the resurrection is to be our focus, and we are to trust God, that just as He raised Jesus from the dead, this same power is at work in the lives of those who follow Jesus. God’s testing is to identify those who are truly citizens of the kingdom of God. Testing comes to those who seek to be citizens of this kingdom. Testing comes to those who are seeking to “faithfully live for Christ in the midst of a fallen world.”<sup>ix</sup> We should not see testing as a negative state of affairs but as an honor to be included among those whom God chooses to exercise their faith, to be among those whom God sees as humble servants ready to choose between God and the world’s allures and in choosing God, to hold to the promises of God. God does not test us to drive us into a miserable life but to disrupt our comfortable lives and force us to rely on Him alone.<sup>x</sup>

Don’t miss that when Abraham chooses to follow God, when he sends his hand and takes the knife to kill his son, that God provides a ram. Abraham does not bring a substitute with him to exchange for Isaac in case there is an option to make a substitution. However, God does extend grace and He provides Abraham and Isaac with a ram. God is gracious. Here again we

can see the crucifixion as God's ultimate testing and as God's ultimate provision. Jesus trusts God for the promise of the resurrection. We also are to look to God to keep His promise of providing for us, providing for us the promise of resurrection of whom Jesus Christ is the first, the first born from the dead.

*Pray with me: Lord Jesus, send your spirit to us to strengthen us that we might be those whose reply to your call is always, "Hineni. Here I am." Open our hearts when we are comfortable to be those ready to be tested and help us to always hold on to the promise of a resurrected life. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> . The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition (p. 94). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV Genesis 22:2

<sup>iii</sup> NRSV Genesis 22:6,8

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV Genesis 22:8

<sup>v</sup> NRSV Ephesians 3:14-21.

<sup>vi</sup> NRSV John 3:16

<sup>vii</sup> When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, Isaac Watts, 1707.

<sup>viii</sup> Brueggemann, Walter; Brueggemann, Walter. Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching) (p. 191). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

<sup>ix</sup> Mulholland, Revelation Class lecture #18

<sup>x</sup> Walton, John H.. Genesis (The NIV Application Commentary) (p. 519). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.