

Sermon – February 25, 2024
“The LORD will provide”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Genesis 22:1-19

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 and move among us, filling us again and anointing the sharing of these words. May they be a blessing for your people that leads us on to life eternal and fruitful labor as we follow you into your mission field. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus, in you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Today is the second Sunday of Lent. We have come today to another altar in our Bibles, an altar built of stone and dirt on one of the high places in the land of Moriah by Abraham. Scholars think they know where this altar was built, in the land of Israel, in what will be the city of David, Jerusalem, on the temple mount. Let's look at the interaction between God and Abraham as the building of another altar occurs and see what we might learn about God's love for His people.

The scriptures record that after these things, God tested Abraham. We need to remember that God has promised Abraham that his offspring will be more numerous than the stars in heaven or the sand on the seashore and that it is through Abraham's offspring that all the nations will be blessed. We also need to recall that the building of this altar happened after Ishmael and Hagar were sent away. God has brought clarity through Sarah's desires that it is through Isaac alone that the promise of God to Abraham will come. Isaac has grown into a young man and Abraham is comfortable with the promise of God he sees beginning to develop as Isaac grows.

Abraham is growing comfortable living with and into the promise of God. Abraham has learned to hear and recognize God's voice. He is ready to obey whenever God speaks. And then, in the midst of the comfort of the promise of God, God calls Abraham's name: "Abraham!" The response to God that Abraham makes, in John Wright's best pronunciation of the Hebrew word, is "Henenie." We translate his response as "Here I am," but the word means more than the desire we have when we sing the song "Here I am, Lord" to hear God speak our name and answer His call to us. The Hebrew word carries the idea of immediate and complete obedience to follow the one to whom we are replying, in this instance, Abraham following God. We will hear Abraham speak this word three times during the building of this altar. With Abraham's response of "Here I am" to God's call, comes God's command: "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."¹ Abraham does not wait to begin to obey God. He does not tell God that he needs some time to pray about this call. While it is early, Abraham gets up, prepares his donkey, gets a couple of his young men to help him on the journey, finds Isaac, cuts wood for the burnt offering, and heads off to the place God has shown him. We also may want to hear God's voice speak to us and call our name, but we have to ask ourselves if we would respond as Abraham does to such a command. Think about what Abraham has been asked to do. God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac to Him as a burnt offering, an offering wholly consumed by fire. Isaac, the child of God's promise, the one through whom that promise is to be fulfilled, is to be killed and offered on an altar to God. The promise from God that Abraham holds, that is to come through Isaac, will end if Abraham does what God asks. We also know that Isaac is Abraham's only son whom he loves. Abraham does not reply to God or question God. Instead, he gets up while it is still early and begins doing what needs to be done in order to obey God's command.

It is a three-day journey by foot from Beersheba where Abraham is staying to the place God has shown him. For three days, Abraham walks along with Isaac and has time to wonder about what he has been told to do. He has been told to kill the one he loves, his only son, so that he may obey God. Abraham has three days to struggle with the tension from the conflict that the command of God and the promise of God create for him. With each step he takes, he draws closer to the place God has shown him, yet with each step Abraham clings to the promise of God and seeks to be obedient to God who has told him to kill the one whom God has given to him to bring about the promise.

On the third day, Abraham looks up and sees the place God has shown him. He stops, tells the young men with him to stay at this place with the donkey, that he and the boy will go, worship and then “we will come back to you.” Notice Abraham tells the young men with him “we” will come back. Abraham goes to worship God with a burnt offering of God’s choosing, but in faith he tells the young men that he and Isaac will come back to them. Abraham may not know how that will occur but in faith he clings to the promise of God that it is through Isaac that the promise will be carried out. Abraham does not know how God will provide for the promise, but he has faith in God and seeks to obey God fully. Notice also that Abraham carries the fire and the knife but takes the wood for the burnt offering from the donkey and lays it on his son Isaac, and the two of them walk on together up the mountain to the place God has shown Abraham.

We don’t know how far they climb, but at some point in their climb, we hear Abraham respond the second time to his name being called. It is Isaac who calls to him this time. At some point in their climb, Isaac stops walking and asks a question from his experience of having seen many burnt offerings sacrificed to God. There is something missing from what they carry. Isaac says, “Father” and Abraham replies with the response of immediate obedience he has earlier used in response to God’s call: “Heinie” or “Here I am.” Isaac sees the fire and the wood but asks Abraham, “Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” In this morning’s scripture we come to the pivotal verse, verse 8. How we read Abraham’s response to Isaac is not clear, and how we understand this verse has implications for what Abraham is doing in response to the testing of God. We have two choices for how we can interpret Abraham’s response: we can hear his response as Abraham telling Isaac that on the mountain God will provide the lamb and ending his response with “my son” as a response to Isaac’s question. Something like, “God will provide the lamb, my son.” This interpretation is that Abraham is telling Isaac not to be concerned about the missing lamb, that God will provide. Or, we can hear Abraham’s words as, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, you my son.” The first one expresses Abraham’s trust that God will provide a lamb somehow to replace Isaac. The second response is Abraham, Isaac’s father, telling his son, his only son, whom he loves, that he is the lamb for the burnt offering. Now we should struggle a bit with how we will understand Abraham’s response as it makes a big difference in how we understand the rest of the building of this altar. We can believe that Isaac takes Abraham’s response as there will be a lamb provided by God and he goes on in

that understanding and is surprised to learn when he is bound and placed on the altar by his father that he is the lamb. Or we can realize that Isaac learns at this moment through his father's words that he is to be the sacrifice and when he is told, he submits to his father, trusting him with his life before the God Abraham serves. Now I have come to the point that I think the latter is the correct understanding. Let me explain some of why I select that understanding. First, Isaac is not a little boy; he is a young man and all of his actions from this point forward, for me, demonstrate a willingness to cooperate fully with his father even if his cooperation means he will die. I don't think there is a better explanation for how we see Isaac cooperate with Abraham and God. He fully submits. He walks on with his father to the place of sacrifice. He waits there until the altar is built. He allows himself to be bound and placed on the altar on top of the wood he has carried. In my reading, I see a pause in the middle of verse 8, between Abraham's response and the two of them walking on together. I think in this moment Isaac surrenders himself fully to his father and to God. There is no sense of struggle or resistance or running away on the part of Isaac. From this point forward he cooperates fully, submitting to the will of his father. The other reason I have come to this understanding is that I see this moment on this mountain in the land of Moriah pointing forward to another time, hundreds of years later, when God the Father will allow a wooden cross to be placed on the back of his Son and that Son will carry the cross up this same hill and in full submission to the will of the Father. That son will be nailed to the cross and will die on that cross. Glory be to God for that cross, that wonderful wooden cross and the full surrender of the Son to the will of the Father.

Abraham and Isaac walk up the mountain together to the place God has shown them. Abraham builds the altar, takes the wood from Isaac, places the wood on the altar, binds his son Isaac, lays him on the wood, then sends his hand to take the knife and kill his son. Abraham demonstrates he will trust God for the promise even if he kills his son. Abraham cannot resolve the tension between the two struggles he faces: the life of his son and the promise of God and obedience to God's command. In this moment as Abraham moves to strike the death blow, we can catch a glimpse of the heart of a man who trusts God fully and will obey him fully. Abraham does not know how God will bring forth the promise through Isaac, but he will obey God fully. And in that instant an angel of the Lord calls Abraham's name twice, "Abraham, Abraham!" The doubling of Abraham's name here expresses urgency, and the call of the angel stops the hand that is poised to strike the death blow. Abraham is commanded not to lay his hand on the boy or

do anything to him, for now God knows that Abraham fears God. God knows that Abraham will fully trust God for the promise and will be obedient to the will of God. In the Jewish tradition, fear of God is understood to be an “an active obedience to the divine willⁱⁱ.” The fear of God is seen clearly in Abraham’s willingness to kill his son in response to the command of God while he holds to and trusts God for the promise of God to be carried out through Isaac. Abraham cannot resolve these two opposing ideas. He can only have faith in God to be God.

We see this moment as a conflict of obedience to God and God’s promises. God is testing Abraham to see if his trust and obedience to God are greater than his love for his only son. Yet God does not demand that Abraham kill Isaac, only that his heart be found willing to fully trust and obey God. Abraham looks up and sees a lamb caught by the horns. Now don’t think of this lamb as being right there the whole time they have been building the altar. The “looking up” may mean that the lamb is off in the distance and Abraham is now guided to see it and then goes and gets it. On the mountain the Lord will provide. Here the Lord provides a lamb for the offering. Abraham gets the lamb, offers it as a sacrifice of burnt offering, and with Isaac returns to his young men. God will speak a second time to Abraham after the offering through the angel and will tell Abraham again the promise that his offspring will be as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore. God will again tell Abraham that through his offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed because Abraham has obeyed God’s voice. Don’t miss in the text that Abraham names this place, “The Lord will provide” and not “The Lord has provided.” Abraham sees the nature of God as one who provides in an ongoing manner what is needed.

Let me point out that on this same mountain in the fullness of time, Jesus, God’s only Son whom he loves, carries up the mountain a wooden cross and is placed on it to die. When Jesus is the sacrifice, there is no other provision of God. What God does not allow Abraham to experience or to do, God allows to happen to his only Son, whom he loves, that we might receive the promise of eternal life. Jesus is the lamb, the sacrifice that the Lord provides for us, each of us, that we might be reconciled to God. There is no moment of grace from God that saves His Son at the last moment. Jesus bears our sin, pays in full the price we owe, and dies in our place so that we might have eternal life through belief in Jesus and the power of the resurrection. What God does not require of Abraham, because of God’s great love for us He requires of his only Son, whom he loves, with whom He is well pleased, that we might have eternal life with God.

We are still working to reclaim the altar in our church for the purpose it was intended. It is a place where our tithes and offerings are placed in surrender to God and our prayers are lifted up, but we want to reclaim it for the purpose it was intended. We want to have a place where we can come and be in the presence of God. An altar is a place where we can come, trusting that the Lord will provide and will guide us through our own times of testing. It is a place where we come in obedience to God, not bringing a sacrifice of a lamb but bringing ourselves to surrender more fully to a God we can trust and obey. We may not yet have the same response we see in Abraham when the voice of God calls our name: "Heinie, Here I am," but if our hearts are stirred, if we have watched Abraham seek to obey God in his testing and have seen Isaac climb the mount in surrender to be the sacrifice, and have seen God's Son climb this same mountain with a wooden cross for us, and our hearts are moved to have more of the faith we see in them, if that desire is born in our hearts this day, then as we sing the closing hymn, let me encourage us to get up and come to our altar and begin to sacrifice our hearts more fully to Jesus. If we would like to have more faith, then come and ask Jesus to strengthen us in our testing and to begin a work in us that will help us to surrender more fully and to trust and obey even when those two seem to conflict. I am going to ask Cindy/Gloria to play, "Here I am, Lord" as our closing hymn. If you are hearing God call your name this day through a stirring in your heart to a deeper faith, let me encourage you to surrender to Jesus, step out of your seat, come to the altar and let Jesus begin to work in your heart. We will let the hymn be the benediction and sending forth today and let today's service have a soft ending. Let's linger in this place before God in our pews or at the altar. If your heart is stirred, if you find a desire within for greater faith, faith that becomes obedience and trust, then come to the altar, surrender what we hold dear in ourselves, trust Jesus to begin to transform us, and let Jesus begin to do a work in our hearts. We may not have experienced a soft ending before in a worship service. Instead of the normal ending of our service, we will move to a hymn and then prayer. If you need to go and when you are ready to leave, then go on out of the church, but as you depart leave room for others who might have a desire to linger longer in the presence of God in an attitude of prayer. If you come to the altar, I will ask you a simple question, "What do you want Jesus to do for you today?" and then will pray for you to receive what is on your heart. If you have no request, that is fine. Just come and be in the presence of Jesus. Come to the altar as you are led in full surrender, asking that we will not be led into the temptation to accommodate the world but will cling to the promise of God

found in the Word of God made flesh. We come to the altar as those who desire to hear God speak our name to call us to a time of testing and are not sure we will be able to obey, yet we hunger to hear our name called to trust in God, obey His commands, and let him provide for us. We come to the altar in faith asking for more faith so that we also will be those who cling to the promise of God and not accept the call of the world to an easier path. We are beginning to reclaim our altar for the purpose it was intended, a place to meet with God when we come to it in full surrender, open to trusting and obeying God and allowing Jesus to be our provision. Let our hearts be stirred in this place to begin to build an altar of faith that will hold to the promise of God of eternal life in Jesus Christ and surrender to the will of the Father, even if our surrender ends a promise of God we have already received. Come and enter into the presence of God at the altar and surrender to the will of the Father. Come to the altar and experience the grace of a God who provides for those who trust and obey in faith. Come and surrender the false promise of compromise the world holds out to us and instead, receive the promise Jesus gives us at the cross. Come as you are led and surrender more fully to a God who provides. Be willing to step out of our comfortable places and move to where we meet God. Come not to a place where we hear, “Well done, thy good and faithful servant,” but we hear in our hearts the words God spoke to Abraham, “For now I know that you fear God.” Come and let the altar become a place where our hearts begin to be built through trust and obedience so that we may receive the provision of God.

Pray with me: Father, we confess that we want to respond to your call with “Here I am” but know that we struggle to trust and obey when you call our name. Jesus, show us anew what surrender looks like. Holy Spirit, give us the courage to leave our comfortable places and come to the altar that we might be transformed into those who have faith to trust and obey. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the

oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

Listen for God’s call of our name and then reply, “Here I am”

and go forth in joy into Jesus’ mission.

ⁱ NRSV Genesis 22:2 Kindle Version

ⁱⁱ The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition (p. 94). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition