

Mar. 4, 2018

Lesson 1: The Lord Will Provide

Scripture: Genesis 22

Context:

The Adult Bible Studies curriculum moves this series to focusing on how we acknowledge God in our daily lives. The first unit focuses in how we follow God and the ways that we do so. What better place to begin than in the beginning of the Bible, the book of Genesis. Here we are reminded of the first figures of the Christian tradition and how they were in relationship with God.

The chapter today focuses on the patriarch Abraham. In early chapters, God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising him and his wife Sarah that they will give birth to a son even in old age. From this son will come God's chosen people, the Israelites. Isaac is born and he is the only child of Abraham and Sarah.

However, chapter twenty-two of Genesis is the climax of Abraham's story. If the story of Abraham had ended with the birth of Isaac, we would have simply a tale of origins.¹ The story of Abraham and Isaac at Mt. Moriah changes everything as we see how serious faith is with Abraham's God. Abraham is told by God to take his "only son Isaac, whom he loves," to Mt. Moriah and offer him as a burnt sacrifice to God. In the story, there is no dialogue as Abraham wakes up the next day and with his son and other servants, begins the journey. When they get to a certain point, Abraham dismisses the servants and continues the journey alone with Isaac.

As they come to gather wood for the fire at the peak of Mt. Moriah, Isaac inquires where they will find a lamb. Abraham responds that God will provide. However, the text glosses over to the point where Abraham puts Isaac on the altar. Then, in a scene that would pierce our hearts in a movie, Abraham lifts a knife over his one and only son to kill him. A voice cries out from the heavens for him to stop as he has shown his fear of God by obeying instructions. A ram is shown to Abraham in a thicket and the ram becomes the sacrifice. Abraham calls the place "the Lord sees."

The text itself shakes us to our core. Most commentators and scholars have commented that it is difficult to comprehend this text in our modern world. How could a loving God ask that someone sacrifice their, "only child who is deeply loved?" There are no definitive answers, but one hypothesis is that the narrative serves as a kind of explanation or etiology (origin story) of the practice of substituting an animal for the firstborn son, who is already considered property of the deity.² Other religions of that time and era reflect that the eldest son was usually given priority as a divine gift to be offered in service or worship.

Application:

I have heard several preachers comment that this is one of the most difficult texts

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1982), 185.

² Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76.

to preach. How do you find the good news in a text where God asks someone to kill and sacrifice his only child on an altar? Just imagine the walk home! Talk about family secrets that will make your eyes bulge and cheeks flush.

There are redeeming qualities in this text though. The first is Abraham's trust that God will provide. He didn't know what would happen when he went up on Mount Moriah and was honest with Isaac that God would provide. One of my favorite things as a pastor is hearing people name where they have felt God providing even in times that are difficult. They don't believe in the prosperity gospel or that if you just have enough determination, God will bless you and you will never get sick or have bad things happen to you. Their faith is built on something more solid than those beliefs. It is built on the promise that God will help us even when things are dark and even when we feel like we go through different trials at life. God will show us new things that may even help us bless others when they go through those things.

The other redeeming quality about this text is that we are reminded that we cannot hold God accountable to working out like a math formula or textbook case study. Our God is one who likes to surprise us along our journey. I think that as we grow in our faith journey, we catch different glimpses along the way of how God surprises us. From time to time, I look at my confirmation journal that I kept when I was nine years old. There is one section where he had to draw a picture of God. Sure enough, I had drawn God as an older white male with a beard and long billowy robes floating on a robe. Without knowing the artist or painting, I had probably conjured up that image from Michaelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, where God is as depicted. But as I continued to grow, both my visual and spiritual understanding of God expanded. God is not a white man as God is beyond our understandings of race and color. God is all encompassing.

But as I grew in my faith, I have realized other things about God. God is both a comfort and a rock, but God is also a challenger and life-changer. Those experiences where I feel God most strongly is not just in the worship service on Sunday or a formal Bible study. Sometimes it is discovering a different perspective on a situation from a neighbor or colleague from a conversation. Sometimes it is reading a Bible study and having a new revelation I haven't had before. It might even just as I make my way on a run or something I notice on my way to work. God is at work in all those experiences perhaps awakening something in us that moves us to a different place in our faith journey. Where are those places that God may be speaking to you and now is the time to change your mind, to open up to new possibilities, and see a new ram in the thicket of life.

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