

A Lectionary 13 7.2.23

Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

Focus Statement: God provides

Fun fact about this Genesis story, if you were here when Trinity was in the process of calling me, you've heard me preach on this text before. This was the assigned text for a sermon I preached in seminary, so when the call committee asked if I had a recording of me preaching, this was the only recording I had to send you. I heard at Bible chat that some of you remember sitting in the social hall watching the recording of me, and your two takeaways were first, you wondered if I knew how to use a camera. My friend Mike was running the camera for me, and apparently he wasn't paying attention, because the frame cut off the top part of my head. Hopefully two years of online church have convinced you I do know how to use a camera. The second takeaway is that I was an excessive hand talker. I think I've managed to tame that a bit over the years, but maybe not. As I was typing this line, I have to tell you I found myself waving my hands frantically over the keyboard as if it could somehow discern what I was trying to say with hand gestures, so maybe I haven't reined that in as well as hoped.

Anyway, the point of that intro is to tell you, I've preached on this text before, and I have exactly as much insight into it as I did ten years ago. Which is to say, I've got nothing. I struggle with this story as much today as I did in seminary. Maybe more because I've lived more. This is a hard, weird story.

We start this morning with God "testing" Abraham by telling him to take his son, his only son, Isaac, whom he loved, and go to a mountain that God would show him to offer the boy

as a burnt offering. There is a lot loaded into these two verses, so let's take a moment to unpack them. First, we've got an allusion to chapter twelve that we read a few weeks ago, and God telling Abraham, Abram at that time, to "go from [his] country and [his] kindred and [his] father's house to the land that God would show [him]." Once again God called Abraham to travel to an unknown place that God would show him when he arrived. In Genesis twelve, God was asking Abraham to leave behind his past. Here it seems God is asking him to leave behind his future. Second, we have an allusion to the incident we heard just last week in the clarification of "your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love." Because remember, Abraham used to have two sons. Isaac was the son of the promise, but Ishmael had promises made over him too, and now Ishmael was gone. Then, beyond Genesis, we have the question of the offering itself. This use of sacrificial language places this story in the context of faith. Based on the requirements of the law in Exodus, God was demanding from Abraham what was already God's, his firstborn son. The Israelite understanding was that the first fruits of the harvest, including one's first born, belonged to God. Though there was also the understanding that, as we'll read about in the Exodus story, God also provides for their redemption. This isn't a story about child sacrifice, something that the law was very clear God was against, so there must be something else going on here.

I cannot imagine this journey Abraham and Isaac took, traveling three days to an unknown destination contemplating such an unthinkable task. One thing all the scholarship I read points out is how silent Abraham is portrayed as being on this journey. Just like in chapter twelve, when he went without a word, once again he loaded his son, two servants, and the wood for an offering, with nothing to say to God but "here I am." Why didn't Abraham

protest, this was the son he waited so long for? Why didn't he question or challenge or push back? Why would he, how could he, take his son on such a journey without even a word? And why would God even call for such a journey in the first place? What kind of God is this?

I told you I last preached on this text in seminary. What I didn't tell you was I preached on it as part of a preaching competition that Bishop Satterlee, who was the preaching professor at LSTC at the time, was overseeing. When this text was announced as the assigned text, a friend and I went to him and were like, what in the world do you expect us to do with this? Bishop Satterlee reminded us that he was a judge in the competition and could not help us write our sermons, it wouldn't be fair to the other participants. But then he added, "but you know what I would do? Look for Jesus." This is an Old Testament text, we pushed back. We paid attention in Pentateuch; Jesus isn't in the Old Testament. "He's not," Bishop Satterlee agreed, "but look for Jesus anyway. Where is Jesus in this story. Maybe try looking in the bushes [If you've heard Jeff and Diane talk about synod assembly, you know Bishop Satterlee is never subtle when it comes to pointing out exactly where he thinks we might find Jesus]. See what you see."

Look in the bushes. See what you see. There is an emphasis, if you look for it, on seeing in this story, and on the unfolding experience of sight. God told Abraham to go to the place God would show him. Abraham saw the place far away. They reached the place, they prepared the altar, and Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns.

And Abraham called the place, “God will provide” or, by another translation, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.”

There are no easy places to go with this text. There are no easy answers to how Abraham and Isaac ended up on a mountain with Isaac bound and Abraham with a knife raised to kill his son, his only son, whom he loved. At one point in the process of writing this sermon, I had a sentence here in which I told you what I think happens in this story. But then I realized, that’s just the Gospel according to Kjersten, me trying to make this uncomfortable story more comfortable. And maybe one of the points of this story is that it is hard and bad and ugly. Maybe one of the points of this story is we cannot make it comfortable; we cannot explain away the hard parts. Because there are times in our lives that do not make sense. Where we ask the question, where was God when this happened, how could God have let that happen, why isn’t God intervening in this or that to fix this, and we do not get answers. There are things in this world, in our lives that cannot be explained or resolved, and any attempts feel cheap and insufficient. So rather than dealing in the weeds of why, let us look at the story as a whole, and notice this one promise. This story does not end in tragedy, because on the mount of the Lord it shall be seen, and on the mount of the Lord an offering was provided. I don’t know why any of this story happened, but I know that when Abraham looked up, there was ram in the bushes, and Abraham’s seemingly optimistic promise to the servants that he and the boy would return, and to Isaac that the Lord would provide the lamb, came true. God did not say this was how the story would resolve, but this is how it resolved, with God providing as Abraham claimed that God would.

This story does not end in tragedy, our story does not end in tragedy, because while it is still in the process of being seen, the promise we cling to is that our redemption has already been provided. Remember what we're doing this summer, we're reading through these texts again in light of the resurrection to hear them again as people reborn in the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the promise of the resurrection is that life always follows death, that hope always shows up in despair, that no place, not even death, is too dark and hard and desolate for Jesus to come to be with God's people. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me," because Jesus and the Father are one, and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we are drawn into that oneness. There are stories in our lives, in this world, that don't make sense. There are experiences we will walk through, we have walked through, we are walking through, that do not have easy resolutions or answers. But on the mount of the Lord it shall be seen that God will provide. Because sometimes it is hard to see, but Jesus always shows up and Jesus is always there. Thanks be to God. Amen.