

## *GOD WILL PROVIDE*

Sermon prepared by The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield, June 28, 2020  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Pine Grove, Bluemont, Virginia  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Martinsburg, West Virginia

“Good morning,” the *New York Times*, last week on Friday reported: “Texas halted its reopening. Russian hackers are targeting people working from home. And the House is expected to support D.C. statehood for the first time.” The coronavirus keeps running through the lives of people. We pray for God to help us. Can we hope for God to provide for us today? We can do our part by wearing masks, keeping our distance from each other, and staying home as much as possible. But will God provide for us?

The Gospel of Matthew speaks of God providing rewards. There are rewards for welcoming Apostles, prophets, righteous persons, and “*the little one’s*.”<sup>1</sup> The very opening of the Gospel reading today relates to how people will receive the missionaries sent out by Jesus. How they receive our Lord Himself. Whoever welcomes Jesus, the Son of God, is also welcoming God the Father, who sent Jesus in the beginning.

The Gospel indicates that God provides rewards that mirror the qualities of the person who is welcomed. Thus whoever welcomes a prophet will be provided with a prophets reward. Whoever welcomes a righteous person will be provided with a reward of the righteous.

Finally, the “little one’s,” were probably the recent converts to the Christian faith. Since they were new they would be “little in faith.” The disciples who provided a precious cup of cold water to the “little one’s” would not lose the reward God would provide for them. What is being said is that the smallest act of kindness provided will be rewarded.

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<sup>1</sup> *Revised Common Lectionary, Episcopal Edition:2007*, Church Publishing Incorporated; Year A, Proper 8 Matthew 10:40-42

From early times in the Bible, the book of *Genesis* tells us “God will provide” the offerings we are expected to give back to God. God finally in their old age gave Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac. Since the parents are past their child bearing ages, Isaac is a *child of and from God*.

Lets look briefly at the story from *Genesis 22:1-14*.<sup>2</sup> The first words are “God tested Abraham.” God whose Hebrew name is *elohim* calls out “Abraham, Abraham” and the patriarch replies, “Here I am.” Elohim says “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering.” It must be noted that Abraham had another son, Ishmael, the child born before through a servant Hagar. They had been cast out of the community as Sarah, now the mother of Absalom’s true son was jealous of Hagar. The *elohim* writer is biased toward Isaac, and its fairer to say that he was not the only son, but the “favorite son.” Isaac, after the casting out of Ishmael, is the only remaining son of Abraham and Sarah.

Preparations move forward. Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled a donkey and took two young men, and cut wood upon which to place an offering. They went to the land of Moriah, to the mountain as God instructed him. On the third day of the journey, Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. The young men are instructed to stay there with the donkey and told:

“The boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” Here is Abraham’s first act of faith, unconscious belief as he states “*we* will come back to you,” when he knows he must give up Isaac as a burnt offering to God.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.Revised Common Lectionary: Proper 8, Genesis 22:1-14; page 150-151*

Abraham loaded the wood on Isaac to carry, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. They walked on together. Isaac wonders and asks his father Abraham, “but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham answers, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” The two of them walk on together and they arrived at the place God had shown them. There Abraham built an altar and laid the wood in order. Then Abraham tied up his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” Abraham caught off guard answers, “Here I am.” The Angel said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy, or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

Walter Russell Bowie, professor at Virginia Seminary, and the famous Associate Editor of Exposition for the *Interpreter's Bible*, was the commentator for the Book of *Genesis* in that work. Dr. Bowie referred to our lesson today from *Genesis 22:1-19* as “*What Abraham Learned.*” He wrote, “Here is a chapter of the Old Testament which shows the need of reading with discretion and discrimination. There is truth before which one will stand

with reverence: but there are vestiges also of old ideas which the developing conscience has long since outgrown. Here in the story of Abraham and Isaac there is imbedded the fact that once people not only practiced human sacrifice, but did so because they thought it was a divine command.

Why did the story of what was planned to be a human sacrifice, get into the Bible? Because it was desired to show that Abraham's devotion to the Hebrew God Elohim that he worshipped was capable of going to the farthest point religion could reach. Human sacrifice was an actual custom among some of the pagan Canaanite tribes. It was practiced for centuries. In the time of Elisha around 800 B.C., in a crisis of battles for his capital the king of Moab "took his eldest son...and offered him for a burnt offering upon the wall."<sup>3</sup> If people worshipping pagan dieties could carry their religion to that terrible cost, how could Abraham show that his religion meant so much to him? Only by being willing to go as far as they did. So in re:presenting what went on in the mind of Abraham the story has a deep and dramatic authenticity. Here was a great soul living in a crude age. He saw people around him offering up their children to show their faith and obedience to false gods.

In spite of the torment to his human love he could not help hearing an inward voice asking him why he should not do as much: and because that thought seemed to press upon his conscience he thought it was the voice of God. The climax of the story is the revelation that what the voice of God would ultimately say was something completely different from what Abraham in his first agony of acceptance had supposed. The climax is not

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, *Interpreter's Bible*: II Kings 3:27 quoted by Bowie, Walter Russel page 642

the sacrifice of Isaac, but the Word from God that Isaac shall not be sacrificed! The story that began with threatened tragedy ends in a perfect oneness between the heart of God and the hearts of people.

The immortal story has a double aspect. The first is what it reveals of Elohim, the Hebrew God. William Cowper's hymn beginning, "God moves in a mysterious way," has in it these lines:

"Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face."<sup>4</sup>

That phrase has a repellent crudeness. Who can imagine God smirking behind a mask? But a truth is seeking explanation there: the ways of God are sometimes hidden and at first not understood; but ultimately God's will is found to be not contradictory to purest emotions planted in human souls. God is not a dark authority who requires the immolation of instinctive human emotions, The Bible read in its great sweep and progress is the story of God's love- a love vaster and more profoundly wise than human souls can immediately recognize, and the end such love as will satisfy all that is highest in our souls.

The Abraham and Isaac story prefigures the story of Jesus Christ. The journey is three days to Morah, the cite of the freeing of Isaac from the burnt offering. Jesus passion is three days from the crucifixion on the cross to the Resurrection where God provided new life for Jesus on Easter. Isaac unwittingly carries the wood for his sacrifice. Jesus Christ carried his wooden cross for his crucifixion. Where is the lamb for the sacrifice? God will provide and after telling Abraham not to kill or hurt the boy, the ram

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<sup>4</sup> *Hymnbook 1982;1985*, Church Pension Fund, New York; Cowper, William (1751-1800). #677

for the sacrifice is found caught in the thicket by his horns. Saint John refers to Jesus as “the lamb of God.”

Our Gospel today, spoke of rewards. If we read on following our lectionary lesson to verses 15 through 18, they are an addition by a later Priestly writer who felt that Abraham’s faith was deserving of explicit commendation.

As we live through the protests of brutality and the spread of the coronavirus, we thank you for sending your Son Jesus Christ with His many healing graces. We pray for those who work in the medical fields throughout the world. We pray for racial justice, aware that black as well as white lives matter. Keep far from harm, the homeless who wander our streets and the police officers who protect us all. We pray for the many blessings the Lord will provide for us this day and forever. We thank you God for your many faithful servants who witness to your love. May we all stay healthy and live with peace and freedom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*