

“Will God Provide?”

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Genesis 22:1-14

Have you ever read a scripture passage that left you scratching your head?

What about passages like these?

Deuteronomy 20:17

“You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded,”

Joshua 6:17

“The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live because she hid the messengers we sent.”

2 Kings 2:23-24

“[Elisha] went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, “Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!” When he turned around and saw them, he cursed

them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys.”

Leviticus 21:18-21

“For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord’s offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God.”

And what about the story in Acts 5 about the couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who sold their property and gave only a portion of it to the church. Remember what happened to them. They both died as a result.

These and many others have perplexed people of faith for ages. We have another troubling and confusing passage to look at today.

Before we read it, let’s recap what happened just prior. Abraham was given a promise by God, a covenant to build out of Abraham’s

offspring a great blessing for all peoples of the earth. Abraham doubted whether God could or would do this. He and Sarah took matters into their own hands and Abraham had a child, Ishmael, with the slave girl Hagar.

Then, through God's providence, Sarah at 90 years old had a child by Abraham, Isaac.

There immediately was trouble, in particular at the point when Hagar got pregnant, and then especially when Isaac was born and the two boys are together.

Sarah wanted to erase the mistake and got Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael to die in the wilderness. God adapted the plan and reasserted the promise to both Ishmael and to Isaac.

We see that God's grace is very large indeed and the expansiveness of the covenant is beyond what Abraham and Sarah could have imagined.

In the story, we have loads of doubt, rebellion, and inter-relational turmoil. All of this sets up the next story. This next story we often read isolated by itself, without this context. Let me know if the context

provides greater depth to the story for you. It does for me.

After I read the story, I will ask you what questions it raises for you and what troubles you about it.

READ GENESIS 22:1-14

Now, let me hear from you. What troubles you about this story? What questions does it raise for you? Don't hold back because you are here in the sanctuary.

Imagine what this is like from Abraham's perspective. He had flubbed up big time. He had rejected God, declared his lack of trust in God. He had not been righteous. He questioned God's presence and promise. Abraham essentially endorsed the death of his first born son and his mistress.

Now, Abraham was being asked to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, through whom the world was to be blessed and about whom this promise and covenant was made.

Let's take a look at some of the interpretations and various perspectives of this passage.

Perhaps this story highlights the back and forth relationship that Abraham and God have had. Does

it sound to you like God was getting back at Abraham here? Like God was fed up with him and ready to remove his promise because Abraham didn't seem up to the task?

Maybe it sounds a bit like the Noah story several chapters earlier in Genesis — where God was fed up with the corruption of the people. God essentially said they were a lost cause, except for Noah and his family.

I get the feeling that Abraham had not proved himself and therefore, God might do away with his son and the heir to the promise, then choose someone else.

Some scholars talk about how God was testing Abraham by his willingness to sacrifice what was most dear to him, his son, and more than this, the son of the promise. He demonstrated that he would be obedient to God. Then God provided the ram in the bushes. The son is saved and Abraham is proved faithful.

Everything is wrapped up in a nice and tidy bow, providing the foundation for the coming promise to unfold.

Others write through the perspective of Abraham's vision — and how it grows and evolves. Abraham sees each thing as he needs to act — first what he needs to take for the sacrifice, then the location for the sacrifice, then after God stays his hand with the knife, Abraham sees the ram in the bushes.

All of these point to the idea that Abraham trusts in the God who sees and the God who saves and the one who provides.

Other theologians address the request to kill Isaac and how it is disturbing. They write about how this story takes place in pre-Israel times back in the day when human sacrifice was common and typical in religious rituals. These commentators say that the experience Abraham had with God is what brought human sacrifice to an end and established a more humane way of ritualized worship.

Other scholars add a twist to the story and point to God's intent here, saying that God never intended Abraham to kill his son, but only to test him to be sure he would be obedient.

Perhaps ... but how do we feel about God actually asking Abraham

to sacrifice his son? It sounds harsh and even manipulative if he didn't intend Abraham to follow through.

And after Abraham heard that request, how could God be trusted again? Would you trust a God who asks you to kill your child? I don't think I could.

I would probably say that any God who asks me to kill another human being is not the God that I want to serve, because I serve a God of love.

At the end of the day, I continue to be conflicted and feel uneasy about this story. How about you?

How do we make sense it?

There is a long-standing tradition in Jewish culture that says there isn't one right answer to most questions, and not one right interpretation of Biblical stories. Respected rabbis say that the heart of wisdom as we read scripture is found in the searching for answers and considering possibilities, not necessarily in finding the one "right" answer.

So the Jews have the Torah (the first five books of our Old Testament), then they have the

Midrash, which is the compilation of rabbinic interpretation that was put together over the course of more than ten centuries.

The Midrash contains a wide range of different perspectives all presented together. Side by side are view points that are in stark contrast and conflict with one another.

They are all included so that people might be challenged to consider them all and how they might be applied to the current world and life in the place of the reader.

In this way, scripture is living and breathing today, not static and unchanging.

As we consider different viewpoints of this story of Abraham and Isaac, there is another one from a noted and respected theologian, Walter Brueggemann that might be, as first glance, one to discard.

He wrote that perhaps it isn't just Abraham being tested in this story, but God is also being tested and through the events with Abraham, God's awareness of humanity is stretched and God is reflecting and learning.

And, says Brueggemann, God changes direction as Abraham raises his hand to kill Isaac. (By the way, this wouldn't be the only story in the Bible where God's mind was changed.) So, instead of starting over like God did with Noah, God is going to work with humanity toward restoration which includes forgiveness and healing, and perhaps a deeper development of character.

If we consider that God is learning, and also consider that we are created in God's image, perhaps there is much greater freedom for us to make mistakes and learn as we go through life.

Perhaps in this story we can find a relationship between God and people in which a dance is taking place.

God is not so stationary, rigid, and unchanging like we have thought, but instead is responding to and flowing with creation in a dynamic interplay of love and connection.

What might be possible if we understood God this way?

What might this mean for us as we endeavor to take this congregation into the future?

It tells me that the future is not written yet, but is one in which we have a say, and God has a say. It is a future that we co-create together.

It is a future in which we will nail some things the first time and find incredible results. And at others will fall flat on our faces in failure.

But it is also a future in which we can each be forgiven and offered another chance.

It is a future in which we can dance with God and which can bring about new insights into who God is, who we are, and fresh understandings about where we might go.

For us here in Birmingham, perhaps our future might hold a brand new worship service that looks very different from this one. It might be held in the lower level here, out in the park, at Baldwin House, or somewhere else.

Our future very well could include people who have never been to church before, and people who have had a very bad experience with church and have somehow healed enough to hang out with church people again.

Our future might include things you and I couldn't imagine, because it has not yet been created.

I am excited about this future because I know that the God we serve will be dancing with us!