

“The Lord Will Provide”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Genesis 22: 1-14**

It only seems appropriate that the dedication of our second capital campaign is today. It was one year ago next Sunday that we dedicated our new sanctuary to the glory of God. It was the peak of a long, arduous journey our congregation embarked on five years ago. That journey was full of highs and lows, many, many decisions, and a tremendous amount of sacrifice. As we celebrate our first year in this beautiful space, it is as if we have reached the top of the mountain, and can look back on our journey with perspective and gratitude.

When you think about it, many of the important events in the biblical witness occur on top of a mountain. Moses sees God through the burning bush and receives the Ten Commandments on Mount Horeb. It was also on a mountain that Moses could see the land which the Israelites would enter, but he would never set foot in that promised-land. Jesus was tempted by the devil on a mountain, giving him the chance to have all Jerusalem as he saw it from that high place. It was also on a mountain that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, as well as being transfigured before his disciples in the presence of Moses and Elijah. I guess you could say that mountains are one of God’s favorite places to meet us human creatures.

Most of those events from the Old and New Testament were magnificent moments, filling human beings with awe and amazement for God. But as Abraham walked with his son Isaac up the mountain at Moriah, he must have been filled with nothing but dread and confusion. The promise of God to Abraham and Sarah had been fulfilled with the birth of Isaac in chapter 21. And then, Ishmael is sent away and cared for and blessed by God, but is not to be the one through whom God’s covenant will be fulfilled. Isaac alone is left, he is the sole heir to Abraham, and there appears to be nothing to stand in his way. Yet now God is commanding Abraham to march up that mountain and prepare a sacrifice to the Lord using his only son as the offering. What is going on here?

This story in the life of Abraham is one of the best-known tales from the Bible, but at the same time one of the most difficult to understand. It could be best-known because this is really the only passage in Genesis which includes interaction and dialogue between Abraham and Isaac. But it is difficult to understand for most of us, because this command from Yahweh goes against all common sense and logic.

What kind of arbitrary God would bring forth a son after so many years of waiting, then order his father to kill him like an animal?

Such anger and frustration toward God is not uncommon in our world today. I have heard a number of people who have experienced tremendous loss in their life ask, “If God is so powerful and good, how could he let my child die?” The horrible natural disasters which seem to strike at random cause us to wonder about why God chooses to allow such things to occur. The senseless violence among our children, or the mass killings of war, or the pain and anguish of terminal illness or disease – they all make us wonder, question, even doubt that God is still a part of this world.

Whether or not such doubt crept into Abraham’s mind is left for us to wonder, since nothing is said about it in the text. What we do know is that God issued a command, a test for Abraham which even God

did not know what the end result would be. Would Abraham run away from God and hide his only child? Or would he follow God's command and sacrifice Isaac at Moriah? Much of what would follow in the life of Israel would ultimately depend on how Abraham responded to such a test, for it would let God know how his covenant would be worked out through Abraham his servant.

What we see in the response of Abraham is a faith which is stronger than most of us can proclaim. He does not hesitate as he sets out for Moriah, nor does he raise his voice toward God in protest. Once he reached the place which God had spoken of, perhaps we see a sign of Abraham's thoughts and faith in talking to his servants: "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, *and then we will come back to you*" (22:5). Was Abraham lying so as not to alarm his son, or was he confident that both of them would walk back down that mountain? Isaac was no dummy, and realized they didn't have the necessary animal to perform the burnt offering. Even in the face of his son's questioning, Abraham appears confident: "God himself will provide the lamb" (22:8).

What does Abraham believe will happen? Does he believe his son will be spared, and they will truly walk down the mountain together? Or is his faith larger than that, broader in scope? Does he have faith that the promise which God has made to him beginning in chapter 12 will ultimately be fulfilled? Does he believe that God will find a way – somehow – to bring forth that promise through him, whether it is through Abraham's son Isaac or through someone else? Abraham's ultimate allegiance is to God, for it is God who has led him all this way, providing for him and Sarah when there seemed little hope. Although Isaac is his only son, the one whom he loves, Abraham is willing to bind him, prepare the fire, and raise the knife in faith.

And with that action, God has an answer to the test. Abraham is willing to do what God commands, and it is through Abraham that he can count to carry out the covenant with his future descendants called Israel. Did God ever intend to harm Isaac? We can't be sure. But at that instant when Abraham raises the knife, an angel commands him to stop. With each call to him, Abraham is consistent: "Here I am." He does not hide, he does not cower, he is faithful and assured of God's providence. And God is assured that he can count on Abraham to be his faithful servant.

Charles Robertson writes: *How many times have you heard someone drive into a store parking lot and say, "Oh, pray that I find a good spot," meaning, of course, a spot close to the entrance. Or a driver indeed gets a prime spot and exclaims, "Thank you, God," or "My angel is looking out for me." I do not doubt for a moment that our Heavenly Father is intimately concerned about us, "counting the hairs on our heads" as Jesus proclaims. But there is something . . . too easy . . . about parking lot theology. Is this what Abraham meant when he said, "The Lord will provide." Does God think that driver deserves that spot more than all the others still navigating the parking lot in their seemingly never-ending quest?*

*Now this may not seem to be a very impressive example, but it is a familiar one. The formula is played out in countless other situations. In its extreme, it makes God a cosmic genie, or a heavenly ATM into which you place a quick prayer and get what you want. "God will provide!" But as the teacher and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, there is no such thing as "cheap grace," and there is no such thing as an easy out. Just look at what Abraham experienced!*

*Now, it is safe to assume that neither you nor I will be called upon to literally recreate this challenge. As the apostle Paul was known to say, "God forbid!" But we are called to examine how we view God and our relationship with God in light of the very real challenges we face. Yes, "God will provide," but often such provision does not come without a cost. As Isaac's own son, Jacob, would*

*learn during a dark night of wrestling with God, when the dawn eventually broke through, he emerged with a blessing, but with a limp as well. And in the Gospels, a tearful, agonized Jesus wished that he could avoid drinking from the cup of suffering that lay before him on the cross. But with a sigh on his lips and trust in his heart, he said, "Not my will, but yours, be done."*

*Job complained, Abraham negotiated, Jacob wrestled, Jesus pleaded. But in the end each one dared to trust, dared to believe that God could indeed be counted on to provide, especially when all seemed most hopeless. The promise has never been a lack of struggle. Ours is a resurrection hope, but this doesn't mean that we won't first face Gethsemane and the cross. Easter indeed awaits, but we will first have to go through Good Friday. Yet even then, even there, we are not alone. As it says in the beloved 23rd Psalm: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me." We may not be able to avoid going through that dark valley, but we will cross it because God is with us. And somehow, some way, God will give the strength to make it to the other side. No wonder Jesus taught his friends to say to God, "Give us this day our daily bread; please give us what we need to make it through today." It is a comforting prayer because it is a realistic prayer.*

*"God will provide." So let us be prepared to sacrifice our cleverness, our ability to get out of things, and most of all our naïve wishful thinking that somehow we are immune to the struggles and pain that faced the countless faithful who came before us. Let us instead dare to trust that God will indeed provide . . . not necessarily a way out, but always a way through ([http://day1.org/3036-god\\_will\\_provide](http://day1.org/3036-god_will_provide)).*

Sacrifice is not something which we do to make ourselves look better than others. Sacrifice is something which emanates from our belief in someone or something so much, that we are willing to give up a part of ourselves in gratitude. Sacrifice is something Abraham was willing to do, for he truly believed that God would provide no matter what might happen. Sacrifice is not a way out or a bargaining chip with God; sacrifice is the right response to our God, who will always provide for us in faithfulness.

When we face challenges as the church, such as theological disagreements or financial obstacles – we profess in faith, "The Lord will provide." When we struggle with the direction of our lives and don't know where to go next – we profess in faith, "The Lord will provide." When we struggle with illness, disease, and pain – we are given the strength to profess in faith, "The Lord will provide." When we come face-to-face with the end of our earthly life – we are given the courage to profess in faith, "The Lord will provide." Those are not shallow, "parking lot" professions of faith. Those are genuine, costly, sacrificial, real professions of faith, which embody the knowledge that our God will be with us from the deepest valleys to the highest mountains, always providing what we need the most.

God has given, God is giving, and God will continue to give. Thanks be to God. Amen.