

Redeeming Grace Lutheran Church | Rogers, MN
February 18, 2018 | 1st Sunday in Lent

Genesis 22:1-18

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." 3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." 6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" 8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. 9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. 12 "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." 13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided." 15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time 16 and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, 18 and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Last December, the world of Christianity was more than a little shocked to hear Pope Francis had sanctioned a change of wording in the Lord's prayer, "lead us not into temptation... is not a good translation," the Pope had said. To be fair, what is the fear? The Pope and others had expressed a concern that the Lord's prayer was being misunderstood—people were actually thinking that God might lead people into temptation. Now, to be sure, no one—Pope, pastor, nor church—has the authority to change the prayer Jesus taught us. The real issue, is not to change the wording of the Lord's prayer, but to teach the difference between a temptation and a test. A temptation is from the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh and is meant to deceive and destroy us. A test is designed by God, and might include several temptations, but ultimately a test is designed to strengthen our faith and draw us closer to God. Today, we see that God does not "lead us into temptation" but that He does test us. And like Abraham, we trust that the LORD will Provide. God has a three-fold provision for each of us: he gives the test, the promise, and the blessing.

I. God provides the test

Back in college, I was with a group of camp counselors who were sent to a high ropes course for leadership training. The purpose was to test our character by facing our fears... which all sounds great until you're the one standing on top of a 30 foot pole on a 2'x2' platform being asked to leap six feet through the air and grab a trapeze bar with nothing

but 30 feet of empty space beneath it. Abraham was being asked to take a jump or a leap of faith as well. Abraham had been 75 and his wife, Sarah, was 70 when God first gave them the promise of a baby boy. It took another 25 years of waiting before God fulfilled that promise. Finally, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 95 they had their boy Isaac. Abraham and Sarah had been waiting for, yearning for this blessing their entire lives, and now just when they had just barely received it, God says, “take your son—your only son, Isaac, whom you love—and offer him as a burn offering.” With this one command, God had singled out the one thing that meant more than life itself to Abraham and asked him, “do you love Me more? Are you willing to let go of the one thing in your life that could stand between you and me?”

This morning, we might find ourselves a little relieved that God doesn’t come to us, single out the one thing we love most in this life and say, “will you let go of even this for me?” Why are we relieved? First, is because we’re afraid of what God would single out as our one love. If we were to ask Abraham before that day what was his one idol he might have responded, “Well, I’m rich so maybe my possessions, or I’ve been married for 70+ years, so perhaps my wife...” But God sifted through Abraham and found the one thing out of everything he possessed that couldn’t be replaced: his son, Isaac. When we face that question, “what is my idol?” We are tempted to gravitate toward the easy things: money, cars, houses, careers, but all these can be replaced. Today, God challenges us to recognize even the relationships that are irreplaceable—the people we love the most—as dangers to our faith. Once we realize what God is talking about, the second question that truly bothers us is, “would I be able to give them up?” Jesus said, “Anyone who loves their father or mother... their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37). Ultimately, we’ll either be at the deathbed of our loved ones, or we’ll be the ones on the death bed. Death will finally and ultimately separate all of us. The question is, can we sacrifice our Isaac? Not that God is asking us to put people to death, but in our hearts can we sacrifice our affection for them that places them above God? By putting people above God in our hearts, we’ve not only made them into idols, but we have jeopardized our own and even their eternal salvation.

II. God provides the promise

So how did Abraham pass his test? He realized the test wasn’t about God saying, “ok, how far is he willing to go for me...” but what God was really looking for was: “What promise will you trust in?” The truth is, God never asks us to just take a “leap of faith,” because faith is never empty handed. In my high ropes course, we had a safety line anchored to our back—even though we couldn’t see it, we had to trust that it would catch us. God had given Abraham all kinds of promises about this boy, Isaac. He told him that through Isaac Abraham would become a great nation, that all nations would be blessed through him, that his descendants would number as the stars in heaven or the sand on the seashore—none of those promises would come true if God didn’t intervene in a special way. But Abraham wasn’t blindly trusting vague promises, he could see his life-line. He was looking at him: his son Isaac. God had worked the miraculous once with him already—bringing the little baby out of the dead womb of Sarah (Hebrews 11:11). Isaac was flesh and blood proof that God had the power to work the impossible. God could also bring that boy back to life if he needed to (Hebrews 11:19) in order to keep His promises.

If Isaac was flesh and blood proof of God's power for Abraham, how much more is Jesus who was raised from the dead proof for us? Jesus' resurrection is proof that His words weren't empty when He promised, "I am the resurrection and the Life, whoever believes in me shall live even though he die and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). In Jesus, we never really lose anyone who has died in the Lord. Like Abraham, we rest with certainty that we will receive them back.

III. God provides the blessing

Abraham trusted that God would provide, and God did come through and provided a substitute ram for the altar to take Isaac's place. Abraham did not have to sacrifice his son, because in his heart, he had already given Isaac as an offering to God. By following through with God's command and placing Isaac on that altar, by faith, God considered the sacrifice complete, holy, and acceptable to Him. Because Abraham did not withhold even his one and only son from God, God turned this into a blessing for both Abraham and Isaac.

Yet do we always pass our tests? My day on the high ropes course, not everyone who leapt successfully caught the trapeze bar... and they glided safely to the ground held firmly in place by their anchor. Does that mean the test wasn't a benefit for them? Absolutely not! It was still a blessing for them. For us, when we look at this entire story, it is so packed full of pictures and foreshadows of Jesus: Isaac is perfectly obedient to his father, carries the wood for his sacrifice up the mountain, just as Jesus carried his cross to his place of sacrifice. There on calvary, at the very base of the Mountain Abraham and Isaac climbed that day, God the Father sacrificed His greatest treasure for us: His one and only Son, Jesus. Isaac reminds us of Jesus' love and obedience to the Father, and the ram reminds us of Jesus' suffering and death in place of all sinners.

The Gospel overshadows each and every moment of Abraham and Isaac's journey up the mountain—every step of the way they were under God's grace. This isn't just an intellectual exercise, but a reality for our own lives: we live every day under the shadow of the Cross and in the light of the open tomb. Forgiven and redeemed by the Jesus' sacrifice in our place. Even though we "fall"—we succeed when we see Christ's forgiveness won for us. We pass our own tests, like Abraham's when we see our lives pointing back to Jesus every bit as much as Abraham and Isaac's lives pointed forward to Jesus.

"Lead us not into temptation." *What does this mean?* God surely tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh would not lead us into unbelief, despair, and other great and shameful sins. And though we are tempted by them, we pray that we will overcome and win the victory. Amen.