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# The Eighth Sunday of Pentecost

**Genesis 22**

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Childless, old Abraham and Sarah received a promise from God that they would have a son, and future, and they were going to be blessed to be a blessing, if only they would begin the adventure of faith. Which they did. Abraham was 75 years old when he received the promise, and 100 when a child named Isaac was born. Remember how much laughter there was at the announcement and then arrival of that child. Isaac. The name means something.

Well then after the child had grown older, God reappeared to Abraham again, and said, “Go up to Mt. Moriah, and take your son, your only son, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering.” Without even arguing with God, Abraham takes his son, heads up the mountain to do just what God told him.

When pastors preach, it is their passion to pull God’s word out of the text for the congregation, to help the congregation to find their own lives in the text. To make the point that this isn’t just some ancient story but is God’s word to us as well. This passage is a great challenge to that agenda. What is God trying to tell us with this passage?

It’s been a very interesting week for me with this text. Monday morning when I pulled it out to look at it afresh, knowing that I was up this week, I was struck by how different the ancient world is from our world. I even dared to wonder if we were worshiping the same God as Abraham. Abraham is held up as a role model for his faith in both the Old and New Testaments. But today, we would throw a father in jail for trying to do something like this. Though I had let Jennie know Genesis 22 would be my choice for the lesson, I got back on the lectionary website and looked at the other options. I thought about emailing Jennie late on Monday and changing the text to Romans, something I could handle.

Tuesday when I got to thinking more about the text, I thought I could spiritualize away the scandal here. After all God didn’t really let Abraham kill his son. It was a test. But I found little comfort in this test. None of us would pass this test. None of us should pass this test. When the unsuspecting Isaac asked his father where the sacrifice was, Abraham simply said, The Lord will provide. Well, is that it, is that God’s word to us – the Lord will provide? Maybe. But what do we do with that advice as a way of living. Next time you fill out a credit application, and you get to the box marked “income,” just write in there “The Lord will provide.” They just love that down at the bank. Besides Abraham wasn’t taking Isaac up the mountain to have spiritual devotions with him. He was really going to kill that

kid. So, I gave up trying to spiritualize away the scandal. Not to worry – it is only Tuesday.

Wednesday, after a wonderful discussion in our morning Men's group, I decided what I needed to do was take my focus off of Abraham, with whom I could relate, and focus instead on God. But that did not get me off the hook. What kind of God would ask a father to sacrifice his only son? But then of course the response to that is the same kind of God whose only son was sacrificed for our sins. But then I started feeling embarrassed since it was easier for me to relate to the pathos of old Abraham than it was to feel the heartbreak of God whose son died for us. That's it, I thought, I'll go with that angle. So I began writing a sermon about the sacrifice this God made, though truthfully, I still wasn't satisfied. Though tempting for Christians reading Old Testament texts, sometimes jumping straight to Jesus is a way to avoid the scandal and demandingness of the text. The passage wouldn't leave me alone, for I knew I still hadn't gotten anywhere near the bottom of this.

Fast forward to Saturday afternoon, my sermon manuscript consisted of my name, the date, Genesis 22, and then whole bunch of blank white space staring back at me. So, I went back in front of this text yet again, and I actually heard myself saying, "How do I rescue this text?" And that's when I got really embarrassed. It is not my calling to rescue the text. God's Word is God's Word. My calling is to surrender to the text.

As that thought came to mind, I could almost see Abraham rise up off the page, slap me around a little bit, and say, "As my story reveals, the journey I've been on with God has been riddled with mistakes. And the worst of them were made when I was trying to rescue the blessing. Now I just trust God." So that's where I am this morning – with that line: now I just trust God.

We all trust something. Students trust their ability for hard work, which will enable them to get a degree and then a job. Parents trust the love they have for their child, that that love will take root. Preachers trust their ability to make sense out of ancient texts. Whatever it is you are trusting in, that's your Isaac, your blessing from God. And when the chips get down, you want to cling to this blessed Isaac. Whatever it is: your education, your health, your work or wealth, your charisma, your skills. Whatever you have, as a person of faith, you will firmly admit it is a blessing from God, and you want to use this blessing to be a blessing for others. So, you've thrown your life into this blessing, in order to have a life that makes

a difference. But what are you going to do on the day God asks for Isaac back? What are you going to do when it's time to give up the blessing?

If you remember Abraham's story up to this point in Genesis, you know that Abraham was an altar builder. Throughout the journey he kept building altars where he would sacrifice his failures and his sins and he would give praise to God, and that freed him to continue on the journey in pursuit of the blessing. But now it's Isaac, the blessing, who he has to put on the altar. He has already sacrificed his past when he left Ur of Chaldees. Now he's being asked to sacrifice his future without Isaac. There will be no descendants. Which means that now it would just be Abraham and God.

But Abraham and God is all there had to be.

By this point, he had trusted God because they had been together for oh so long. The trust wove them inseparably together. He didn't understand God, but he trusted God.

Everyone, at some point in their lives, will run into Genesis 22. You can't skip it. It comes for all of us. John of the Cross called it the dark night of the soul that's coming. That's the day you put your blessing back on the altar, and you have no idea how you are going to get by without it. And in that day, you face one of the most important questions of your soul. That question is: do you still want God if no blessings come attached? If it's just God and you, are you still interested? And your response to that question will illustrate what you've been worshipping all along. Have you been worshipping God, or the blessing you can't live without?

Well, as you all know, God didn't let Abraham sacrifice Isaac. It was close. Just in the nick of time, an angel prevented him from slaying his son. He looked up and saw the ram caught in the thicket. He sacrificed it instead. So yes, the Lord did provide.

But not until Abraham put Isaac on the altar.

A few chapters later in Genesis we hear how Abraham lived to be 175 years old. I think all of his years with Isaac, after that dramatic day on Mt. Moriah were far more enjoyable than even the days of laughter he shared with Isaac before then. And that's because Abraham was no longer worried about losing Isaac. He was no longer worried about losing him because he had already given Isaac back to God. For me, it means just this: you can only enjoy a blessing if you don't have to keep it. Blessings are meant to be held in open hands, the posture of faith and trust.