

*Texts: Genesis 21:1-3, 22:1-14; John 1:29-34*

*Subject: Binding of Isaac*

*Theme: How Can This Be?*

*Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 19, 2021; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We took the kids to the movies last weekend. I love movie theaters. During the shut down, it was one of the things I missed the most. Over a period of eight years, I worked just about every job in the movie theater. I was a greeter and ticket taker, spent some time in concession sales, paid my dues as an usher, and finally moved upstairs as a projectionist. I think it's all digital and automated now - of course, things change. But it's always a joy for me to go to the theater and see a movie, and I love the trailers - the previews of coming attractions. And because theaters were closed for so long, there are so many movies that have been piling up to be released. One I'm looking forward to is the new James Bond movie. It's the fifth and final installment starring Daniel Craig, and it's called *No Time to Die*. Now, we know how the movie ends, of course. This is only the 26th film in the series. Bond reluctantly takes on a new mission. He gets a new car and all the cool gadgets. Things blow up. The bad guys try to stop him. We wait to see how Bond will overcome each obstacle. We know the hero will win, and good will prevail. But it's still exciting to see what's going to happen next, and to watch how it all plays out.

In Genesis we hear the promise to Abram - God will make him father of a great nation, and give him a Son, even in his old age. We read each continuing chapter in earnest, wondering how God will make this promise come to be a reality. Time passes, and in order to help speed things along, Abraham has a child, Ishmael, with his wife's

servant Hagar, and only later on does Sarah give birth to Isaac, named for his mother's laughter. Hagar and Ishmael are sent away, and Isaac remains the beloved son and heir, until we hear that God has a test in store for Abraham.

This is one of those stories that maybe we would just like to skip over. It raises many questions and we struggle to make sense of it. As the father of a son named Isaac, I'm not a fan of this story either. Is this really about child sacrifice? Why would God do this? Is that the kind of God we have? Just last week we heard about God who created the world in all its variety and called it good, and human beings who were made in God's image named as very good. Now we hear God putting Abraham to the test? *How can this be?* We can often get stuck in a mindset of literalism. It's how a large number of people have read scripture in this country for so long, but like last week's story this one is helpful if we understand it as a teaching, which is so much more than a historical account.

In some Jewish traditions, scripture is for the purpose of provoking questions - it opens us up, to get us thinking, to draw us into this rich tradition and to hear God's voice in our lives. This story calls us to remember the promise.

We know there were other ancient near-eastern cultures where the people were made to give to their gods, to make sacrifices to avoid divine wrath and anger, retribution and death - even sacrificing their own children. In this story God intervenes, to draw a line - to put an end to the practice for the family of Abraham and all who would follow. Why test Abraham - this chosen one, in the first place?

Reed Carlson from United Lutheran Seminary notes that there were additional Jewish writings that inserted characters like jealous angels or a satan-like figure that

instigated this test against Abraham, much like we see in the book of Job. Carlson writes, “One purpose may have been to give voice to doubts and concerns held by the community, but which may have been perceived as irreverent or contrarian.” This tradition shows that we are not the first to struggle with these stories. We have doubts and questions too.

We might wonder why Abraham doesn’t argue with God’s request to sacrifice his son. After all, he spent a good deal of energy pleading for the people of Sodom and Gomorroah (Gen. 18), so why would he not plead for the life of his son? *How can this be?* Read literally, this story gets interpreted as a call to blind obedience, and can lead to all kinds of harm and oppressive theologies. What’s most important are the relationships - between father and son, between the divine and the human beings, between people of faith and the world around them.

We know that Abraham has two sons, yet a special relationship with Isaac, born in his old age, according to God’s promise. Another version of this story has the conversation going something like this: God said, take your son. Abraham answered, “I have two sons.” God said, “Your only one.” Abraham replied, “Each one is the only one of his mother.” God said, “The one whom you love.” Abraham answered, “Is there any limit to a father’s affections?” And God said, “Isaac.”

Maybe this story gets us thinking about the ways we have blindly followed what we were taught before, and gives us some new insight. Maybe we will think about the ways we have sacrificed the wellbeing of the ones we love to gods of productivity, or prestige, or to our own desires and needs. Maybe we take notice of how God is still speaking in our lives and calling us to change directions.

There's no easy explanation of why Abraham was willing to do it - to take the life of this beloved son. We hear the story and cringe because we know it's not right. We are not proud of Abraham for going as far as he did. but then, the angel of the Lord speaks, telling Abraham to stop. The test is finished. God provides a ram for the sacrifice, and Abraham names the place *moriah*, or "the Lord will provide" which would become the place of the temple mount in Jerusalem.

The Lord will provide.

We have had or *will have* moments in our lives that will cause us to call everything we think we know about God into question. We might feel like God is testing us, when we face problems and disasters large and small, grief, loss, illness, and pain. We struggle to obey God's commands and the call God has placed on each of us. It's not just me, right?

God keeps whispering, turn around, look up, and listen. God is near.

God tested Abraham (or so he thought...). Was Abraham testing God? Waiting to see what God would do?

God's going to win.

In the meantime we will struggle and face difficult choices, upended plans, and challenges. God's story is the story of life and promises kept. In those difficult moments, we can know God's character is that of a parent who loves and gives, rather than one who takes and destroys what we love.

Like the James Bond films, we know how this story ends - the hero wins, right? If the hero dies, that's a different kind of movie. All kinds of things may get in the way, and we have to see how he will navigate the obstacles, but we are not afraid.

We already know the ending:

God provided the lamb.

God moved to take away our sin, to bring us back to God and to one another.

God gave his only Son, Jesus, for the sake of the world, that good creation, the people and animals, and plants, and land and sea and sky. God's love walked into our lives, and stayed with us, and even death - death on a cross could not keep the promise from coming true. Jesus rose from the grave and sent us the Holy Spirit, to lead and guide us as God's people. God's grace is for us. God's grace is forever.

Nothing can stop it. The Lord will always provide.

This orients how we arrange our relationships, how we listen for God's voice in our lives, how we participate in the life of the world around us as part of the family of faith, in service to neighbors. Even when we do not know what is going to happen next, we can trust that God will be with us, that God will provide, and that we are not alone.

We can firmly trust and believe that we have a creative God, a life-giving God, a generous God who gives us the splendor of earth and sky and sea and plant life and animals, and makes us in the divine image - this is the first thing we hear in scripture. Our God promises life, love, forgiveness, and provides what we need for life of faithful service, discipleship, and love in this life here and now. God's promise of abundant life begins at our baptism, and nothing can stand in the way of God's promises coming true. Amen.