

“God Provides”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Genesis 22: 1-14

When I looked up the word “sacrifice” in the dictionary, I was struck by the following definition: “Sacrifice - the act of giving up something that you want to keep especially in order to get or do something else or to help someone” (www.merriam-webster.com).

In our modern world, we often speak of making a sacrifice in order to “do something else or to help someone.” During the season of Lent, Christians will often sacrifice something from their everyday routine so that they feel a closer connection to God or to their brothers and sisters in Christ. We may sacrifice eating out for one month in order that we might purchase something for ourselves: clothing, furniture, savings for a trip. We may sacrifice the time we would normally spend doing something for ourselves, and instead use that time to help a neighbor, a friend, or a family member.

I reflected on the idea of sacrifice this week when I thought of my parents, and I’m sure others can relate to what I am about to share as they consider their own parents. Our family was never wealthy with material things, but certainly would be considered solidly-middle class Americans. I was taught early-on that if I wanted a new toy, I could make sacrifices and work toward achieving that goal. We didn’t take elaborate vacations like some of my classmates did, but our time away was often spent with our extended family, and I was taught the deep value of those relationships.

When it came time for me to look at colleges, I was never told, “Only look at these, as we can’t afford the others.” Instead, I was free to consider what felt right and best for my academic and personal interests. When I chose Davidson College, other than Vanderbilt University, it was probably the most expensive college I looked at. I did receive financial assistance and scholarship help, to be sure. But it was primarily due to the sacrifices my parents made that I graduated after four years with less than \$4,000 in student loans to repay, while fellow classmates were leaving with \$20,000-\$40,000 in loans.

That is just one of the ways my parents “gave up something that they might want to keep especially in order to help someone.” That sacrifice included saving their money from the day I was born, and never being tempted to spend it on something they wanted or needed. I am approaching the terrifying abyss of two children being in college within the next four to six years. But as that day comes closer, I will

remember how my family made sacrifices on my behalf, and I will seek to do the same for our daughters and their future education.

I'm sure many of you can relate to how others have made sacrifices on your behalf, or how you have made sacrifices on behalf of someone you love. When we make a sacrifice for someone else, it is out of our deep love and devotion for them, and our desire that they live into their fullest expression as a child of God. When someone makes a sacrifice on our behalf, it is deeply humbling to know that someone loves us in such abundance, illustrating the abundant, unconditional love God has for us in Jesus Christ. Sacrifice is a powerful action in our relationships and our lives of faith.

And yet, in this story from Genesis, we are reminded that sacrifice's meaning is more than about money or possessions or time. It can also mean life and death. The story of Abraham and Isaac is one of the most challenging stories for me in the Bible, and I know it is because I am a parent. 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 he 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. Now, God is commanding Abraham to march up that mountain and prepare a sacrifice to the Lord using his only son as the offering. And yet I am also reminded that even in the midst of such conflicting messages and challenging commands, the mystery of faith is trusting that God will provide.

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 that seem to strike at random cause us to wonder 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.

Over many years, I have listened to many of you who have had the anguish of your child dying before you. A car accident, disease, or drug abuse. As an infant, a teenager, or as an adult. Your struggles in faith have been honest and forthright: How is this part of God's plan? Why must my child suffer and die? How will I live tomorrow in hope when my hope seemingly has been taken away? Surely similar questions must have been on the heart of Abraham as he placed one foot in front of the other up the mountain at Moriah.

What we know is that God issued a command, a test for Abraham that 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 that 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. God is assured that he can count on Abraham to be his faithful servant.

And God provides. Later in this service, you will see your responses to the question we asked at the beginning of this month, "How has God provided for you?" It is a helpful question to ask ourselves every day, for too often we can fall into the trap that we are providing all that we need. Much like Abraham, we are called to listen closely to God's voice, and trust in God's providence, no matter how challenging that direction may seem.

And God provides. There has been much that has happened in the life of our denomination in the past two weeks, as well as in our state in the past week. Rapidly changing laws and reactions to decisions by the General Assembly of our church. I have written a pastoral letter to each of you in response to these events, and I would ask that you pick up that letter in your church mailboxes while you are here today, or read it online this afternoon or this week. Most importantly, much like Abraham was in a confusing and uncertain time walking up the mountain of Moriah, we are struggling to take one step in front of the other in faith. But, I also firmly believe that when our trust is in God alone, as Abraham's was, nothing will separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ.

And God provides. It has been through tremendous sacrifice by hundreds of people that we are on this precipice of our third capital campaign. It has been because members and friends, fellow churches and our presbytery, strangers and neighbors – all of whom have believed in the mission we have taken on as a people of faith in this place. It has been through our collective sacrifice and generosity that we know God has provided and will continue to provide, if only we trust not in our own abilities but in God's abilities through us. Much like Abraham, we are people who seek to humbly serve our Lord, knowing that whatever lies before us, God will provide.

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