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The Lord Will Provide: Genesis 22.1-19¹

JOHN YORK

I am always excited about the prospect of coming to the Pepperdine lectures, for a variety of reasons. One is the opportunity to renew relationships with people who shared in my West Coast life—the life of my youth and college days in Oregon, the life of my teaching days at Columbia Christian. I love the Pacific Ocean and the views of this campus, particularly on spring days like today that are so full of color.

But what I most look forward to about this week is the prospect of being uncomfortable. By this I mean the prospect of someone or some circumstance challenging my comfortable modes of faith, of hearing a speaker that shakes my foundations, rocks my world, provokes me to new ways of considering my faith and my God and my Savior.

Even as I thought about my assigned text for this evening I became not just uncomfortable but a bit agitated. This is not a text you find in Christian parenting manuals!

For the past several weeks, as I thought about the story of Abraham sacrificing his son, his only son—being willing to kill his son in the name of faith in his God—I kept returning in my mind to that well-worn phrase in the history of our tradition: “Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent.” Now I know that phrase has to do with deciding what principles or rules still apply to our circumstances. But this is a text that turns the slogan on its head.

I find myself left in silence where the Bible speaks and feeling compelled to speak in all of the places that the text is silent. I don’t know what to say about the opening sentence, “After these things God tested Abraham.” What do you mean God tested Abraham? I thought God tested no man!

Is the line just some “insider information” so that we readers can feel better about the request? Like that emergency broadcasting network message we get on our televisions sometimes, “This is a test.” In other words, are we to know what Abraham doesn’t know from the beginning—and that is that God doesn’t really mean what he’s saying? More than God playing a game with Abraham seems to be at stake. I don’t know what to say....



Then there is the overwhelming silence in this text that begs us to speak out. What did Abraham tell Sarah before he left on this camp-out? What was the conversation between Isaac and his Dad for three-plus days. Did they really just speak two sentences in three days? If this is a story about Abraham’s faith, what about Isaac’s faith? Doesn’t anyone care about how he is being scarred for life by this trauma?

If this story were in the news today, wouldn’t we all simply assume that Abraham was a lunatic-fringe fanatic who needed to be incarcerated and

kept away from any and all children, especially his only son, for the rest of his life? And what are we to do with a God who in other places makes very clear his disdain for the taking of human life, and even more so the offering of human life as religious sacrifice. Doesn't someone need to get God off the hook here?

In many ways, the culmination of Abraham's faith pilgrimage is this event. From the beginning of the story with God's call and Abraham's silent but obedient decision to embrace the call and promise and venture into the land of Canaan, Abraham has incredibly strong moments of faith. And he also fails miserably at times. In his "faithful" waiting for the promised son, he and wife, Sarah, struggle through years of unfulfilled promise, sometimes creating their own plan in God's behalf, at other times trying to sabotage God's plan by passing Sarah off to other men. When the son of promise, Isaac, is finally born to Sarah, there is another son, Ishmael, on the scene.

After all Abraham's years of wandering and waiting, after the traumas associated with his nephew Lot and handmaid Hagar, after his years of living as an alien without any kind of peace treaty with the natives, after he has given up on Sarah ever having a child, God makes all of the promises come true. The camp is full of laughter. The son of laughter, Isaac, is the pride and joy of life.

And then God says, "Abraham." Abraham responds, "Here I am." God's next word's must take his breath away. "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love." Even God's description emphasizes the incredible sacrifice about to be required of Abraham.

Abraham, you know the promise that I made to you that you waited on for 25 years?
Remember the gift of laughter I gave you? I've come to take it back! Go to the land of
Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will show you.

Without a word, much like in Genesis chapter 12, and apparently without hesitation, Abraham rises early the next morning and cuts the wood and takes his son and a pack animal and two servants and heads out. For three days he is left to contemplate God's promises and God's assurance that Isaac is the child of promise.

When he sees the mountains in the distance, he leaves behind the servants and the donkey, and he and Isaac go ahead by themselves. As he leaves the servants the apparent silence of the journey is broken with these words: "*We* will worship, and then *we* will come back to you."

Finally, as they are walking side by side with Isaac carrying the firewood and Abraham carrying a knife and a torch, we hear from the son: "Father!" Abraham responds as he did to God's voice, by saying, "Here I am." Isaac then states an obvious problem; there is wood and fire but no lamb for the sacrifice. Abraham responds with words that reflect a lifetime of faith training: "God will see to it! God will provide the lamb, my son."

One of the odd assumptions we make when we read this story is the age of Isaac. I have no idea where or how I got it into my head that Isaac must be 11 to 12 years old. I suppose it is because the boy described here is still small enough to be tied up and picked up and put on an altar. But the fact that he also is big enough to carry the firewood a fairly long distance suggests he may be older. Some scholars suggest he was around 16. Maybe he was the age of one of my sons, who turned 22 and 20 this year. In the first century, the Jewish historian Josephus said Isaac was 25. That guess probably comes from an assumption that 25 years of waiting for a son was matched by 25 years with the son before the sacrifice. The age of your mental picture does affect the story!

This is Isaac's story of faith too! If he is 16, you have a 116-year-old father tying up a strong teenager and putting him on the altar. I'm closer than I care to admit to being half as old as Abraham in this story, and

In so many ways only hindsight can describe faith, but only an eye toward the future can maintain faith.

I know exactly what would happen if I tried to tie up either one of my sons! This image of a bound Isaac on the altar can only be a picture of submission and obedience and trust.

The heartbreak of the moment is incomprehensible to me. I actually cannot even conceive of taking my sons into such a setting. Jesus said, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Laying down my life for someone else is just barely understandable. Taking my own son's life is not!

Taking my only son's life—the son of promise, the son of my barren wife, Sarah: that's too much to ask! Even if I believe in life after death—resurrection, as the writer of Hebrews suggests of Abraham—how can I ever look my son in the eye again? How can my son ever look me in the eye again?

Yet Abraham can say, "we will go worship and we will return." Whatever he believed at that moment, it is clear that he was well prepared to carry out the requirements of God and give back to God the gift of laughter, his son Isaac. But the voice calling, "*Abraham, Abraham,*" stops his action.

Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

Abraham then sees the sacrifice that he had believed God would provide, a ram caught by his horns in a thicket. He names the place Yahweh Yireh, which means, "The Lord will provide." For the first time in Isaac's hearing (that we are told of), God then reiterates the promise:

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." (Gen 22:15-18)

It is an incredible story that borders on unbelievable. After the years of travel and training, Abraham proves faithful in the ultimate test. But what exactly is the test? That he loves and trusts God more than God's promises? That he loves God more than he loves Isaac? That he will follow God even when faced with the unethical, immoral demand to kill his own child? And must we simply leave the fate of Isaac to the silence of the text? Our desire for answers makes the paradoxical circumstances cry out for clarity and resolution.

And consider what God himself was up to in the story. Only when the knife is raised in the air do we readers discover, with Abraham, from the voice that stills Abraham's hand that God needs to learn something in this event. God needs to know! Think about the power of that sentence. If Abraham knows this is just a test, it's like having a fire drill at school. If God already knows the answer regarding Abraham's faith, there is no reason to say, "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son."

God is not some passive outside force in this story. This is not just about the faith of Abraham in God, it is about the faith of God in Abraham. God is risking all of his promises on Abraham in this story. God is making himself vulnerable to the loss of his investment in Abraham at this point. And he is placing his own trustworthiness up for grabs in the eyes of both Abraham and Isaac: asking Abraham to give up the most precious thing in his life; requiring a son to submit to death by his own father's hand.

God is asking Abraham to relinquish the future! To give back the son who represents the essence of the promise that caused Abraham to leave Haran in the first place. Trust in God alone means trusting him enough to give back what otherwise was the assurance of faith in the first place.

I prefer a brand of faith in God that lives only the side of receiving God's goodness, not the side of faith that recognizes my human tendencies to turn the promises of God into idols. Yet we are to hear in this story

that faithful relationship with God can put everyone at risk, including God himself, because God will prove himself faithful. The task for us all is to catch glimpses of what God sees, to have the moments of discovery where we understand what he is up to in our lives, even understand that God is placing himself at risk in relationship with us.

In so many ways only hindsight can describe faith, but only an eye toward the future can maintain faith. We can look back and see how far in our journey of faith we have come. By his grace we are no longer who and what we used to be but we are changed.

I know it seems appropriate to ask ourselves who or what our own Isaac is at this point. Who is the person or the job or the circumstance that we love more than our own lives to the point of placing our hope for the future in someone or something other than God? But I don't want you to ask questions about your Isaac. I want you to ask questions about your God.

Is he too predictable, too comfortable, too stable? Yes, he is faithful, but he also is relational—and that means vulnerability and constancy and intentionality. He keeps risking himself for us; what are you willing to risk for him?

It is that version of faith and faithfulness that God vulnerably embodies himself when he becomes flesh and dwells among us. For the sake of relationship with the rest of humanity, he requires the death of his only son. Now he comes to us and demands that we not domesticate our faith. That we not become so accustomed to his gracious gifts that we assume the promises rather than live in vulnerable relationship with the giver.

Abraham was right when he told his only son, "God himself will provide a lamb, my son." But only when the knife was raised over his head could he hear and see the Lord's provision. Faith in relationships is always risky business! It's high maintenance! Risky among us humans; risky when God invites us into relationship with him. Risky when in the name of God we seek to live in relationship with one another.

God in all of his faithfulness longs to speak to each of our hearts and say, "Now I know." Jesus said, "He who would save his will lose it; she who loses her life for Jesus' sake and the gospel will find it."

Will we risk our all for him as he already has for us?

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ENDNOTES

- 1 This sermon was delivered at the annual Pepperdine Lectures, April 30, 2003.

