

Genesis 22:1-19 & Luke 19:28-40
March 28, 2010

South Plains
Passion Sunday

God Tests and Provides

One of my favorite books as a child was Grimm's Fairy Tales, a collection of German folk stories. I was almost grown before I realized that the title referred to the brothers Grimm who wrote the stories down. I had always thought the fairy tales were called "grim" because they were sinister, serious and forbidding. Indeed, many of them are just that. "Hansel and Gretel" for instance is the story of a mother who loses her children intentionally in the forest where they are captured by a wicked witch who intends to cook the children and eat them. That's a story "ripped from the headlines" as they say on TV.

I thought about those fairy tales when I re-read the story of God's command to Abraham in Genesis 22 where God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son. As with Hansel and Gretel, the prospect is gruesome. Abraham had wanted a son and God had promised he would have a son. Finally, in their old age, Abraham and Sarah conceive and Isaac, their only child, is born. It seems as if the promises of the Lord are being fulfilled at last. Then comes this strange command. Scripture introduces the story by saying, "God tested Abraham."

Most of us don't like tests of any kind. I usually break out in a cold sweat. The idea of God testing a person's faith by making such a cruel and absurd

demand, "kill your son," sounds like a nightmare or the hallucination of a sick mind. My suspicion is that the writers of scripture recorded this story for the same reason that the brothers Grimm recorded their fairy tales. This is a story that reflects the cruelty of death, the cliff's edge of tragedy, the apparent injustice of life. We like to think that life is supposed to be fair, that good people prosper and bad people suffer. Sometimes things work out that way... but not always. Sometimes it takes a miraculous ending to make it all right.

Holy Week is another story of the injustice of life, the cruelty of humanity and a tragedy that was not avoided despite the final triumph of the resurrection. There is no ram caught in the thicket on Golgotha, ready to take Jesus' place on the cross. Jesus dies. The Bible speaks to us in many different ways. It offers advice and rules for living. It also offers stories that demonstrate the messiness of life, stories that tell how faithful people can respond to the mess with bravery and confidence. Bravery and confidence do not come easily for most of us. We need such stories

Abraham was a brave individual. He was willing to strike out from his homeland in present day Turkey and travel with his family to this new territory called Canaan, what we know as the Holy Land. He encountered all the adjustments and dangers faced by pioneer settlers in our country: strange customs and unfriendly natives. He fought and he persevered. Apparently he was a brave and successful warrior. But he did not always have

confidence that God would fulfill the promises God made: that he would have many descendants and become a blessing to the nations.

God wanted more than a strong man, a victorious leader. God wanted someone who would trust God completely. The sacrifice tested Abraham's trust in the Lord. This testing with a sacrifice troubles people. Some think God had to perform the test because God really did not know the outcome. Others think the whole story represents a primitive misunderstanding about the nature of God, that the real God does not want sacrifices at all. We cannot read God's mind. We do not know all of God's motives. What we can know for sure is that God provides the sacrifice that he requires; and Abraham learns that he can trust God to provide.

And, that is the message of Holy Week, the message of the cross. We call it "Holy Week" because we believe God was in control every day. For the people living through those seven days it was a week of horror, a roller coaster filled with anxiety. Roller Coasters start with a long, slow climb to the highest point. The high point of this week comes right at the beginning. Jesus rides into Jerusalem to cheering crowds of disciples. When the Pharisees want the people to stop cheering, Jesus instead shuts up his critics. "If these [crowds] were silent, the stones would shout out."

From this day on, it's pretty much downhill for Jesus. He tells some good parables and makes some

telling points against the religious establishment, but he is constantly sparring with his enemies. He comes away briefly from the conflict and takes the twelve out to dinner. It's a solemn, farewell meal. His prayers in Gethsemane that night are interrupted by the soldiers who come to arrest him, and then the real horrors start. The four gospels agree that Jesus maintains his composure through the interrogations, the beatings, and the threats simply because he believes that everything happening is fulfilling the plan of God. He is confident in his heavenly Father.

There is no other way to explain Abraham's conduct. He believes that God has a plan. When God calls to Abraham, he replies, "Here I am." There's no protest or argument. He saddles his donkey, loads the wood for a fire, and starts walking with Isaac. When Isaac wants to ask a question, the father says, "Here I am, my son." Isaac asks the obvious, "Where's the lamb for the sacrifice?" Abraham answers ambiguously, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering." When Abraham raises the knife over Isaac and God calls to him once again, his reply is the same, "Here I am." Abraham makes himself available to the Lord.

By the way, "Here I am" is the title of a hymn that I hope we can learn in the blue Hymnal.

There is little to be admired and certainly nothing to be imitated in Abraham's conduct except his availability to God. He's crazy. Nevertheless, God

provides the animal for the sacrifice. God says, "Do not lay a hand on the boy." The only way our Hebrew forebears could explain what had happened was to note that the testing is over, and Abraham passed. God knows that he can trust Abraham.

Some messy situations in this life are so unexplainable that there's no one to blame for the mess but God: disease strikes us down; a birth defect, an addiction, or just some abnormality makes a mess of our dreams. It's not that God wants to hurt us or make us suffer; it's just that we cannot see any rationale for some tragedies except to say that the reasons are hidden in the inscrutable mystery of God. The best we can do is to hang on to what we do know. We cannot figure out the why's and wherefore's of God. What we do know about God is that God will provide a way out. It may not be the way we want or expect, but it will be God's way and God will be with us.

Jesus knew that. Facing Pilate, he would have known Psalm 37:5 that says, "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act." As Pilate washed his hands, trying to distance himself from the death sentence, Jesus could have recalled the third Servant Song of the prophet Isaiah, "It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty (50:9)." When the whip fell across his back, Jesus might have recited to himself the familiar words of Isaiah 53:4, "We accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions." He surely knew the

Psalm that begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Because the same Psalm 22 says, "He did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him (22:1 and 24)."

It is easier to believe in a god who is our sugar daddy, a god who always gives us what we want, a god who is only slightly frustrated by evil. That is a small god, a god with a lower case "g," at best the partial God glimpsed on the road from the Mount of Olives where Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The large God of the whole Judeo-Christian scriptures is more than our minds can fully comprehend.

A few years ago, I was shopping for a piece of farm equipment. I was told to go see a certain individual who was described this way. "He's a sight to deal with, but he'll find you what you need at a fair price." God finds what we need for no price at all. It's free grace. That's the God Abraham was dealing with, the God of Golgotha and Gethsemane, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's the God we await at Easter.

God asks us to believe that God provides for us. Behind all our science and technology, God provides. Beyond our financial institutions, God provides. Transcending our hard work, God provides. After the schooling, the training, the discipline, the morality, God is the one who can be trusted to provide. More trustworthy than even our faithful religiosity is God's provision.

Why does God allow the messiness we cannot untangle, the tragedies without explanation? We do not know. It is enough to know that time and again God uses these situations for good purposes. God identifies as his own, the people who put their trust in him. God strengthens us through these experiences. And, at the end of every test are good gifts.

We hear the addict declare, "I'm not happy about my addiction, but I'm grateful God used it to bring me back." Or the reformed prisoner will say, "I'm not glad I am in prison, but I don't believe there was any other way for God to save me from a life of crime." Thank God for prison.

We are not asked to be happy about the mess. We do not need to gloss over tragedy by glibly repeating, "It's the will of God." We are only asked to trust in God's provision.

This week we are waiting for the ram in the thicket. Jesus is the Lamb God provides, God's provision for us. We can trust God.