

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Genesis of Our Faith: God's Provision
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Genesis 22:1-14; Luke 16:10-13

The scripture that we are focusing on today from Genesis about Abraham and Issac, may be one of the hardest stories that scripture has to offer us. Its presentation is very matter of fact and largely emotionless. God asks Abraham to do something, and Abraham follows directions without question, finally. Except the thing that God asks this time is shocking. God wants Abraham to take his son Issac to a mountain and sacrifice him. This ask is outrageous! Issac is the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham on day one of their meeting, Issac is the whole reason the partnership exists. Issac is the one through which God's nation will be established. Isaac's inevitability has been questioned by Sarah, and God laughed at her for doubting. Abraham is rebuked by God for doubting Issac would ever arrive. Isaac is the resolution of the story of Abraham, and NOW...Now God wants Abraham to kill Issac? This is messed up. (I would use stronger language but there are impressionable ears among us.) The nicest way to put it is, "This is messed up."

For this story to be read this week is equally as messed up. The story of Abraham sacrificing Issac is about how God always provides, but in our current situation it is tough to talk about God always providing. Talking about God's provision when our world is 20 months into the 7th most deadly pandemic and the end is far from in sight. Sure, let's talk about God's provision the very week veterans wrestle with understanding the impact of their service in Afghanistan. When Haiti is looking for loved ones after an earthquake, when the linesmen in our area haven't seen their families in months because they cannot catch a break while repairing our electrical infrastructure. This is the time we talk about God's provisions? A time when it does not exactly look like God is doing much providing for anyone.

When we read this story during a time that is as messed up as it is right now it can feel ridiculous that Abraham goes along with God's request without a single question. For me, the most infuriating part is how calm Abraham is. When God asks him to do this awful thing, when his son begins to catch on and questions him, the only thing Abraham says is "Here I am." This is a man who in the past has had no problem taking matters into his own hands and defying God's directions. He had no problem fathering a son by another woman as Sarah remained childless. I feel like we could really use that kind of healthy questioning and proactive effort in this moment instead of just, "Here I am."

This phrase can be heard in lots of different tones. It could be the timid response of a broken-down man who has tried defying God but now is passively submitting to whatever is thrown at him, (sigh) "Here I am." But when we look at how this phrase is used in other places in scripture we see that broken-down is not necessarily the right way to hear Abraham's response.

When we read people saying, "Here I am," in scripture it is never the cry of a broken, submissive person doing something they don't want to do. "Here I am," is the answer of someone ready to listen and partner with God. It is a phrase of trust. The prophets and fathers of our faith say, "Here I am," because they have learned that is all they need to provide when God asks them to do something, they just need to show up. God provides all the rest of their needs. "Here I am," is a statement of mature trust in God and glad presence to what God will ask of them.

So Abraham is not broken-down by God. This is not senseless submission. This is a bold statement of a strong partner who trusts their God. Abraham and God have been on a long journey of trust building. They began with a promise. There have been doubts along the way, but the partnership has worked out, and Issac is the promise fulfilled. Abraham has learned not to take things into his own hands but to remain present to what God is doing, hence the response, "Here I am." Abraham knows the best thing he can do is be present.

We see at this point in Abraham's life a very high trust of God. Abraham unquestionably trusts that God will provide. He also knows that those provisions don't always show up in the way we expect or on the schedule we would prefer. Abraham's calm acceptance of this request shows he trusts God enough to know, as wild as it may seem, it will lead him to something good. Even if he can't figure out how or what that could possibly be right now.

Even as he trusts God, I think Abraham deeply distrusts this situation. Simply because he is a good dad. He was troubled about sending Ishamel away because his instincts told him he needed to protect his son. There is no way a father, a father who has deeply longed for this child, is calmly taking his son up a mountain to kill him. Abraham's mind must be screaming at him to stop. There is just no way Abraham with his parental instincts is making that climb without red flags being thrown from every sense inside of him. And yet here he is, seemingly calm, climbing a mountain with Issac at his side.

Every step he takes must be powered by his trust in God.

God has provided in the past. Keep walking. When I questioned God, God provided. Keep walking. God promised to make me a great nation, God has good intentions for me. Keep walking. God said Sarah would have a child, Issac is that promise fulfilled. Keep Walking. God has always shown up in the scariest of times. Keep walking. None of this seems good right now, but I know my God. Keep walking.

At the same time that Abraham deeply trusts God he also distrusts what has been asked of him. This is possible because distrust is not the opposite of trust. We often think that trust is on one end of a spectrum and distrust is on the other, but scans of our brains have proven this is not the case. Studies have looked at how the brain processes trust and how it responds when we distrust something. When scientists take brain scans and show the subject someone they have high trust of, the part of the brain that lights up is the prefrontal cortex - our logic center. This part of our brain takes in info and compares it over time. It checks past experiences, reasons out possible futures, and logically concludes a level of trust we can safely give.

Distrust however is controlled by our amygdala. This is our fear center. This part of our brain reacts quickly and can override all other brain activity. Some people call this our guard dog. The amygdala served us well when life and death threats happened every day. The guard dog would start barking and we would know something was off. The birds had stopped chirping, maybe a predator is nearby. Those clouds look a little too green for a summer afternoon. We should seek shelter. The amygdala senses danger and takes over our response in order to keep us alive. When the guard dog is barking there is something we need to pay attention to.

Since trust and distrust are controlled by completely different parts of our brain it means we can trust something completely and distrust it at the same time. Let me give you an example: On our last trip to our partners in Mexico, our team took a day trip to a cenote (cey-NO-tay). A cenote is a deep cavern that has opened up to the surface and filled with water. They become these amazing swimming holes of freshwater 70 feet deep. The surface of the water is also 80-100 feet from the surface so you have two choices to get into the water. One is to walk down the flights of stairs into the water, the other is to jump in. I am always game to try anything once. I am not afraid of heights, I am a strong swimmer, and I was watching everyone else jump in and 100% of them not only survived but were

walking out and doing it again and again. I trusted the jump option. I knew with every fiber of my being I would survive it, it would be fun, and I would feel fulfilled by trying something new. But when I got to the edge of that cliff and looked over into the water my guard dog started barking. The amygdala tried every trauma response to get me to abandon the jump. I fled but walked back, my stomach started to turn, my temperature started to rise. Every red flag that a guard dog could throw up was thrown. And then I jumped.

Even though my guard dog was telling me to distrust this situation, I still had a strong trust in myself and my ability. I was able to override the distrust with trust to achieve the thing I wanted at that moment. Trust and distrust are not opposites; they are on two different continuums. This is why we can trust that God will provide in the midst of global turmoil and personal setbacks, while also wrestling with doubt and grief and anger. Abraham had learned to trust God 100%, so when God asks him to sacrifice the thing of the greatest value in Abraham's life, all Abraham says is, "Here I am." He trusts God will provide, but that does not mean his guard dog was not barking for him to turn around.

That walk must have been terrible for Abraham and he made it anyway, fueled by his trust of God. Knowing all he had to do was stay present to how God was going to provide in this messed up situation. Staying present was key, which is why we hear Abraham say, "Here I am," multiple times. It is a response to someone else but it is also a reminder to Abraham. He says out loud, "Here I am," and internally he is thinking, "Here I am by God's good intentions and promises I am here. Here I am. Let's see how God provides for me now." Every moment of that walk Abraham stays present to the moment and to God's way of providing.

We should also be clear about what Abraham is not doing. He is not barreling forward trying to get the task done, he is present. He is present enough to pack up the donkey and take help for the journey. He is present enough to notice the mountain God has designated for the sacrifice. He is present, in the moment, all the way to raising the knife, even then he is so present he can notice the shift in God's request. He hears the voice tell him to stop, and he sees the ram stuck in the bushes.

Imagine if Abraham was too stubborn to stay present. If God gave him this command and he set that in stone, ignoring everything around him. Imagine if Abraham had focused in on the task at hand, only seeing that outcome, being sure he was doing God's will. Sure of the way God was going to provide and only looking for what he expected to see. If Abraham had done this he would have brought that knife down thinking it was God's full plan and he would have missed the way God was showing up for him at that moment.

For some people this concept of trusting God puts blinders on them. They are so focused on God providing, especially in the way they expect God to provide, they miss the provisions of the moment.

There is an old tale about a Pastor who trusted in God's provision unequivocally. One day their town experienced sudden flooding. The sirens started going off and all the news channels immediately reported a mandatory evacuation. The Pastor, who trusted God's provision, stayed put. In an hour their home was filling with water. A boat came to rescue the Pastor, but the Pastor said, "I do not let fear control my life. I trust that God will protect me," and they sent the boat away. Shortly after the Pastor found themselves on the roof of their home, waters closing in, they cried out to God to save them. A helicopter heard the screams and threw down a ladder to the Pastor, but they pushed it away saying, "I cannot live in fear of this water. I was not given a spirit of fear. I live by faith in my God's provision." Well...the Pastor drowned. And when they got to heaven they yelled at God, "Why didn't you save me? I trusted you to provide for me!" God replied. "I alerted the local weather center how bad it would be and they set off the alarms with plenty of time for you to evacuate. I sent a boat to get you out. I even sent a rescue crew in a helicopter. What more was I supposed to do?"

God's provision did not show up in the one way the Pastor wanted, so they were blind to the actual help God was sending. I wish this was just a silly story but this level of blindness to how God provides is everywhere. If Abraham had shut down his logic, closed off his ears to the world, and blindly charged ahead, he would have missed the ram altogether. But Abraham had learned how God's provisions work.

During the process of building trust with God, Abraham had learned to keep his head up and his eyes open and to not be so stubborn that he misses God showing up with the provision in a way that he didn't expect. Trusting God and understanding how God shows up for us made it possible for Abraham to obey God even in the most messed up of situations.

There are any number of situations in our lives and in our world that we can categorize as messed up. Things that are setting off our guard dogs who are barking at us to distrust everything around us. The trick is to allow our trust of God to have a say too, so we keep moving and keep our eyes open for the ram in the bush.

If we keep our heads up and our eyes open we begin to notice how God is providing even now. We notice vaccines and masks protecting millions of people. We notice how women are standing strong against Taliban oppression. We notice humanitarian aid pouring into Haiti and out-of-state crews coming to offer relief to those working tirelessly. God does provide.

Talking about God's provision in a time when we are still walking up that mountain feels disingenuous. When our guard dog is barking it is tremendously hard to engage our trust and say, "Here I am." But we are a people who trust God will provide, we are a people who sing "How Great Thou Art" at funerals because we know how God's provisions show up in our lives. Not in the way we expect, or maybe even the way we want, but in the way we need at that moment.

Keep your head up and eyes open for the way God will provide. And as we continue to walk up this mountain we will be the ones saying, "Here I am. Here I am. Here I am."