

God Will Provide (A Sermon for Proper 8A)
St. Francis Episcopal Church (Charleston, S.C.)
Genesis 22:1-14
July 2, 2017

I'm only here one week, so let's talk about one of the most difficult passages in the Bible, right?

We've been preaching through the Old Testament back at my parish, so I paused a bit when I saw that the Binding of Isaac was the next story up. I realized I had an opportunity to avoid the story because I was going to be somewhere else, and could preach on the Gospel.

But it is too easy to write off or ignore this--or any other difficult biblical passage--based solely on a literal reading.

Instead we have to struggle with the difficult passages instead of ignoring them. And maybe, just maybe, we can hear the Holy Spirit whispering good news to us, even in the midst of the struggle.

As I read this story this week, I expected to be horrified by Abraham's actions as I have been in the past; by the "I was only following orders" defense Abraham would have had to give Sarah when he got home, had he gone through with it.

Instead of seeing the brutality of the test, I saw the tenderness of the relationship between father and son. If I can be honest with you all, today is the first day I've been in a funeral home since March 30, when I last saw my dad's body.

My dad died just a couple of months ago, and I think reading this story through the lens of fatherly love has changed the story for me a bit.

The change comes in a pair of verses that I've never noticed before. On the third

day, Abraham and his son Isaac leave their servants and pack animals and continue on alone. Here the narrator tells us, “So the two of them walked on together.”

As they make their way up the mountain, Isaac stops and questions his father. Abraham answers, and then again the narrator tells us, “So the two of them walked on together.” Father and son, together. Keeping each other from stumbling as they hike up the mountain. Walking on, together.

Of course, we know the full story and we know that Abraham is preparing to walk down alone. Or is he?

And this is where a new question arises, a question that links Abraham’s deep relationship with Isaac to Abraham’s deep relationship with God. The question is this: Is Abraham lying?

In between those two tender bits of narration (“So the two of them walked on together”) Isaac asks the whereabouts of the lamb for the burnt offering.

And Abraham responds: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

So, is Abraham lying to Isaac here? Is Abraham just telling Isaac what the boy needs to hear to keep him going, to keep him compliant?

Or does Abraham actually believe what he is saying to his son? Does Abraham believe that God will, indeed, provide a way out of this mess?

I think the answer falls somewhere in between.

A cynical person might call his response a lie. But I think Abraham is speaking out of his hope, out of his deep conviction that he will not need to go through with it, that

the promise God made to him years earlier will continue to hold, the promise that countless generations will spring from him, beginning with his son Isaac.

No, Abraham isn't lying: he's speaking the only truth he's ever known.

From the day Abraham stepped out into the desert all those years ago, God has provided, even when Abraham's impatience or fear or stubbornness kept him from seeing God's provision.

It all starts with the word "provide": in Hebrew this is literally the word "see" or "perceive." So when Abraham says to Isaac, "God will provide," we can loosely translate it as, "We shall notice...or see...or recognize what God is up to."

This understanding of God's provision presupposes that God is already active wherever we are going, that God has already shown up before we arrive. We enter a story already in progress, so to speak. God is already providing, and we just have to have the eyes to see.

After all, once the Angel of the Lord spoke Abraham looked up, he noticed something. The ram...the sacrifice.

We don't know why God demands this sacrifice in the first place, and we don't know why God removes the demand at the end. But between verse 2: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love....", and verse 12 "You have not withheld your son, your only son...", stands verse 8 – Abraham's faith, his hope against hope that God will provide.

Abraham has a vision of something beyond the present horror. Abraham has seen, time and time again, that God will provide.

And so have we. In big moments and small moments, we have seen the Lord provide. So this week let's be on the lookout. Let's leave this place, and see what God's up to.

Amen.