

SERMON TITLE: "On the Third Day: God Will Provide"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 22:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 17, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Since Easter Sunday, we've been growing in our understanding of what it means that God raised Jesus "on the third day." By realizing that the "third day" wasn't a literal three-times-24-hours-later, we've been given permission to think outside the box and open up our understandings to a number of other biblical references and shades of meaning. The Bible is a book of words that tries to explain the divine and the indescribable. Consequently, the scriptures rely on us to read between the lines, fill in the blanks, and intuit what can't be otherwise communicated. When we follow this guidance, we are able to go with the women to the tomb on Easter morning and be reminded not only that Jesus had said that he would rise again on the third day, but that, given some time to heal, we too can rise up from our grief. Like those disciples walking on the road to Emmaus on the third day after tragic shock and traumatic sorrow, we too can discover that Jesus is with us. And, like Queen Esther, whose Jewish people were threatened with annihilation, on the third day we too can rise to the occasion to do amazing and important things.

As we continue in this Easter season of resurrection life and new possibilities, we encounter yet another story of something that happened on the third day. In Genesis 22, we see that, on the first day, God called to Abraham and gave the command that he should sacrifice his only and much-loved son. On the second day, Abraham saddled his donkey and took two servants and his son Isaac. They cut wood and set out toward the distant place that God had indicated. Genesis 22:4 tells us that "on the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away." On that third day, Abraham and Isaac left the servants behind and continued on. When they found the right place, Abraham built an altar, piled the wood on it, bound up his son, and prepared to burn him alive. Fortunately, on that third day, God stopped

Abraham from completing that gruesome deed, and Abraham saw the ram that God had provided as an alternate sacrifice. As the third day came to an end, both father *and son* were able to celebrate their belief that “God will provide.” This morning I’d like us to consider this truth. On the third day, what exactly will God provide?

1—GOD WILL PROVIDE SPIRITUAL TESTING

According to this story, the first thing that God will provide is spiritual testing. Whatever else this story communicates, it shocks us with the horrible command of God for Abraham to sacrifice his son. We can’t even begin to fathom why God would tell Abraham to burn his beloved son on an altar, and we’re so very relieved when this expectation is finally revoked. But, as the story is written, we see it clearly as a test of Abraham’s faith and obedience. In the previous chapters of Genesis, God had miraculously raised up this child Isaac to be Abraham’s promise. Through Isaac, God would make Abraham’s descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky. And now, after God had told Abraham to send away his first son Ishmael, and essentially put all Abraham’s seed and Sarah’s eggs in this one basket of Isaac, God was telling Abraham to do this terrible, horrible, heinous, life-destroying, promise-killing deed. Or, at least that’s how it seemed to Abraham. That’s why this story is so classic. That’s why Abraham has been extolled through three millennia as the great father of faith. In spite of how illogical, dangerous, and cruel-hearted it must have seemed to turn his beloved son into a burnt offering, Abraham didn’t argue with God. Abraham didn’t make excuses or dillydally. Abraham said, “Here I am,” trusted God, and got busy obeying God’s order.

God provides spiritual testing for us, as well. Fortunately, none of us is asked to burn our children to death on the altar of faith. But God does expect us to get our priorities in order. God comes first. Family comes second. Only God can be of ultimate importance, and the only way we can properly teach our children this lesson is by modeling it for them. I know some folks would get on a high horse about this divine expectation. They would insist that family comes first always. But, honestly, we know

of times when we and other people selfishly put other things like our careers, our social status, and even our recreation and hobbies before the well-being of our families. So, maybe the spiritual testing God is providing for us here is a chance to get all our priorities straight, beginning with God. It's only when we put God first that the rest of the order makes sense.

2—GOD WILL PROVIDE FOR OUR MATERIAL NEEDS

In addition to spiritual testing, this story also indicates that God will provide for our material needs. No matter what else we think about this strange story, the happy ending occurs when God provides a ram for the burnt offering. Abraham doesn't have to sacrifice his son because God has miraculously arranged for a ram to be stuck in the bushes.

As I pondered this story all week long and wondered what to make of such a close call with human sacrifice, I got to thinking about Isaac. What kind of kid would be so compliant as to climb up on an altar obviously built for burning sacrifices? I wondered if the Genesis account might have left out some of the backstory details. Maybe Isaac was supposed to have been watching the family's flock. Maybe Isaac got distracted, like kids do. While he wasn't paying close enough attention, one of the rams got away. Maybe Abraham got so mad about this loss of livestock that he threatened his son. Maybe father Abraham said something like, "Well, Isaac, if you had been more responsible, this wouldn't have happened. Don't tell me that it's just one ram. Don't you realize how valuable one ram is to this family? Don't you know that our flock depends on having rams? Don't you know that we eat sheep, and we need their wool to make our clothes? Don't you know that our religious faith requires us to sacrifice sheep? Do you think rams grow on trees? Well, they don't. So you and I are going to go looking for that ram, and if we don't find it, then you, young man, will be our sacrifice."

Can you hear your dad's voice in that? I can! There's nothing like a father's fury over our youthful indiscretions. There's nothing like the fatherly concern that children learn the value of material goods, the importance of being responsible with possessions, and the hard work required to earn a

living. There's nothing quite like the bravado of a dad who wants to make an impression on a young mind, even if he knows that his bark is bigger than his bite.

In the end, lots of dads provide what is needed. After the fender bender, they may have a lot to say to their much loved teenager, but they do pay for the car to be repaired. After the fight or the fall, fathers may want to put the fear of God into their progeny, but they do pay for the broken glasses and broken windows to be replaced. After their child's wasteful spending spree, dads may spew some choice words, but, if they can afford to, they do still pay the tuition bill. And God, just like so many of our fathers, can be counted on to provide for our material needs. God never wants us to take him for granted as a pushover. So there may be a couple "days" in which things seem kind of dicey. But, when we cooperate and do our part, we can surely trust that God will come through for us. When we humbly chop and carry the wood, when we repentantly climb up on the altar to show that we've learned our lesson—we can be confident that, on the third day, God will provide for our material needs.

3—GOD WILL PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE MATURE TO CHANGE

Of course, learning and growing shouldn't only be for the young. It's good if we older ones can still learn some lessons in life too. This story of Abraham and Isaac presents the idea that, on the third day, God will *even* provide opportunities for the mature to change. In Genesis 22, we see a man of God who went through a transformation of thinking. Like a caterpillar who spun a cocoon and then emerged as a butterfly, Abraham went through a metamorphosis. You might recall that Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. He wasn't any spring chicken. And now, after all those years of walking the dusty earth, it was as if God had provided him a set of wings so he could fly.

The transformation went like this. In verse one, when Abraham said, "Here I am," he seemed totally on board with the idea that God would ask him to sacrifice his son. No questions asked, Abraham got right to work on the preparations.

In verse seven, when Abraham again responded, “Here I am,” some time had elapsed. It was now the third day, and Abraham had been on this journey with his son. When Isaac noted, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham replied, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Unless Abraham was intentionally misleading Isaac, Abraham must have at least begun at this point to consider that there might be another way for this sacrifice to happen. Abraham was still absolutely faithful to God, but a shift was beginning to occur. The love of a father for his son was shaping his ideas and beliefs about what God might want and what God would provide.

Later on that same third day, Abraham had obediently built the altar, piled up the wood, bound Isaac, and placed his son on the pile to burn. That’s when we hear God calling to Abraham again, frantically this time. This third time when Abraham answered, “Here I am,” the faithful father was finally willing and able to hear a different message. “Don’t lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him,” said God, “for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.” At this third stage of development, Abraham was able to change his thinking. The very elderly father was now able to hear and learn a new way to be faithful to God. Abraham was able to understand that one of the things God will provide is opportunities for even us mature ones to learn and grow and change.

CONCLUSION

You probably heard about the Mormon missionary who died from a bicycle accident in Taiwan on Tuesday. When his North Ogden parents were interviewed by the *Standard Examiner*, the 18-year old’s mother said, ““We didn’t anticipate an Abrahamic test.””^{*} Rarely do any of us expect such things to happen. But, as this story and so many others remind us, we can be sure that God will provide us some spiritual testing. Fortunately, there’s more to life’s journey than difficult tests, however. On the third

day, God will also provide material sustenance and opportunities for us to grow and change. Whether we're young or old, God has just what we need. We can be sure that, on the third day, God will provide.

*JaNae Francis, "Bike accident kills N.O. missionary," April 13, 2016, 1A.