

God Will Provide  
Genesis 22:1 – 14  
Sunday, July 2, 2017

I'm a big fan of the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. It's the true story of this company of soldiers in WWII who saw some of the most intense fighting of the war. They were paratroopers who dropped into Normandy on D-Day, fought in the Battle of the Bulge, liberated concentration camps. But there's this one scene where they are training in England. They have this terrible leader who everyone hates, Captain Sobel. He's mean and demanding and he makes a lot of mistakes. He gets the company lost out in the field because he can't read the maps or he makes impulsive decisions that end up being wrong.

So in this one scene, he gets lost as he's leading the soldiers across this field to their objective, and there is a barbed wire fence running across the field. And he's saying, "This shouldn't be here! Where are we?" He sends the soldiers to conceal themselves behind some trees while he figures out what to do. One of the soldiers does a perfect impression of their Major (Major Horton, the higher-ranking officer). All the other soldiers start egging him on to do the impression while their hiding behind these trees. He calls out, "What's the hold up, Captain Sobel?" And, of course, Captain Sobel can't *see* him because they're hiding behind trees, so he thinks it really is Major Horton; it sounds just like him. He says, "There's a barbed wire fence." The soldier yells back in Major Horton's voice, "You cut that fence and get these soldiers through there!" So he cuts the fence, which belongs to a farmer who has cows in that field. The cows get loose, the farmer is furious, and the soldiers have to spend the rest of the day herding all these cows back into the field.

When they get back to headquarters, another higher-ranking officer is yelling at Captain Sobel, "Who told you to cut that man's fence?" He says, "Major Horton." "*Major Horton* told you to

cut that fence?” “Yes, sir.” “Major Horton is on leave in London.” And Captain Sobel realizes that he has been fooled by his soldiers, and that was *not* Major Horton’s voice that he heard.

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This story of Abraham and Isaac is a difficult one. There are so many questions that this raises about the nature of God and faith. But the question that I kept coming back to all week was this: How do we know we’re doing the right thing? How do we know that we’re listening to *God’s* voice and following *God’s* will, doing what *God* wants us to do? Abraham heard God tell him to *kill his son*. What would we say about someone today who says, “God told me to sacrifice my child?” We’d say they’re *crazy*; that they may be hearing *voices*, but it’s not *God*. How did Abraham know? And how do *we* know that it’s God’s voice we’re hearing and not just the voice of our own will or desires, what someone else wants us to do, what the *world* tells us we should do?

Abraham and Sarah had spent a *lifetime* waiting for a child. And God had kept promising Abraham, “I will give you a son. I will make a great nation of you. I will make you the ancestor of a multitude of people.” They have spent *decades* waiting for this. And when that promise is fulfilled and they finally have a son, God tells Abraham to kill him. Now, we know that God was *testing* Abraham. Implied in that was that God wasn’t *really* going to let Abraham kill Isaac. God just wanted to see if he *would*. “Were you only following me to get a child out of me, or are you truly devoted to me?” Questions about *that* aside, while *we* know this was a test, Abraham didn’t know that. God says, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering to me,” and the very next thing it says is, “So Abraham went.” No other information was given to him. No assurances that everything was going to work out and be okay.

How did Abraham know that he was doing the right thing?

I think the honest answer is that he *didn't*. He didn't *know* that God would provide a ram and he wouldn't have to kill his son. He went there fully prepared to *do* that, just like he sent his other son Ishmael and his mother Hagar off into the wilderness. Abraham has already gotten rid of one son, because he heard God's voice tell him it was okay to do *that*. So now he hears God's voice tell him to kill *this* son, and he obeys.

We get this moment when Abraham and Isaac are walking up the mountain, and Isaac says, "Father, we have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" And Abraham says, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering." Now, there are a couple of ways to take that. You can take it as Abraham having such faith in God that he knew God would not let his son die; that God would provide a way out. Or you can take it as Abraham saying, "God has *already* provided the lamb. It's *you*. Don't ask so many questions."

It's not clear *what* Abraham meant by that, because Abraham himself doesn't know how this is going to turn out. But Abraham *trusts* that God will provide. That's his sole affirmation. God will provide. Whether that means providing a *substitute* – like the ram – or providing another son (which is hard for us to stomach). Abraham has seen, time and time again, how God has provided for him, how God has kept God's promise and made life possible, and Abraham trusts that God will provide again. Because Abraham trusts not in the *gift*, but in the *giver* of the gift. Isaac is a *sign* of God's promise to Abraham. But Abraham trusts not in the *sign* of the promise, he trusts in the *promise itself*. He trusts that the God who has *made* this promise to him will find a way to *keep* this promise. Walter Brueggemann writes that, in the end, this story is not about

*Abraham* being faithful. It is about *God* being faithful.<sup>1</sup> He says, “Abraham knows beyond understanding that God will find a way to bring life even in this scenario of death.”<sup>2</sup> Abraham trusts God implicitly, because he has seen God to be good over and over again.

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And so for *us*, how do *we* know that we are doing the right thing, listening to God’s voice, following God’s will? We don’t. Any more than Abraham did, we don’t *know* with any degree of certainty. But this isn’t about *knowing*. It’s about *trusting*. It’s about doing the best we can to discern God’s voice, God’s will, and then taking a step in faith because we trust that God is good, and that whichever way this goes – if it works out or if it doesn’t – God will provide.

Four years ago my family and I came to St. John’s because we discerned that this was where God wanted us to be. Everything about the process and our interaction with the committee made us feel that this was right, that this was God’s will for us. But still, with a decision *that big*, there is always that question in the back of your mind, “What if this *isn’t* right? What if this isn’t what *God* wants? What if this is just what *I* want?” As strongly as we felt that this was what we were supposed to be doing, we didn’t *know*, with *certainty*, because how *can* you? But we *trusted* that, even if it *wasn’t* right and it *didn’t* work out, God would provide.

I’ve been reminded of that as I’ve seen Ridgley and Will taking the same step these past few months. And the other week as we blessed Paul and Cindy Wilson before they moved to North Carolina. Or when you’re making that decision whether to take a new job. Or which college to choose. Or whether it’s time to put this person you love into a nursing home or into hospice care. Or whether it’s time to let them go. Or when you’re struggling with conflict in your family

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, pg. 194.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Pg. 193.

(Should I forgive this person? Should I talk to them about their addiction? Should I help this person who has hurt me before?).

How do we know we're doing the right thing? We don't. We do the best we can to listen for God's voice, we read scripture, we pray, and then we take a step, trusting that even if the whole thing blows up in our face, God will provide. God will find a way to bring about life, even in the midst of uncertainty and death.

We have to ask ourselves, like Abraham, "Do I trust the *gift*, or do I trust the *giver* of the gift?" Because when we trust the *giver* of the gift, *that* is what allows us to say, like Abraham did, "Here I am," and walk on together into God's future.