

**“The Rhythm of God’s Provisions**  
**Year A—13<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Genesis 22: 9-14 (1-14)**  
**Matthew 10: 40-42**  
**June 29, 2014**

“The Rhythm of God’s Provisions”  
 Rev. Rob Carter

Abraham and Sarah—the foreparents of our faith. The story begins in Genesis 12, as “the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.’”

So the 75 year old and his wife packed up all they could and left the only life they had ever known in a land called Haran... following the call of God to a land called Canaan.

Along the way, many of us might recall how God promised to give them offspring. And not just that. Offspring more numerous than the stars. It was a promise that proved tough to hold onto as the years passed by with yet not one offspring of their own, save for the baby Abram had with his slave, Hagar.

But in time, when Abraham was 100 years old God gave Abraham and Sarah a baby, whom they fittingly named Isaac, which means laughter... for who would believe in such a laughable promise as God had given them.

And with Isaac’s arrival, the covenant promise took shape. Isaac was living proof that God could be trusted... even when you follow the call of God to a foreign land among foreign people for reasons you yourself don’t fully understand... Isaac was living proof that God keeps God’s promises. God provides a way.

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And yet, in an unthinkable twist, it’s hard to read what comes next in Scripture. In our lesson today, God commands Abraham, “Take your child of promise, your only son Isaac whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”

It is, I believe, the singularly most offensive request in all of Scripture—in part because this horrific request comes from the very mouth of God!

Like many, I cringe at the words on the page.

I tell myself, “No God of love could ever require such a thing! No God of grace... no God of mercy could possibly desire something like this. So ‘No,’ I say. If this is part of the covenant... If this is part of faith, then count me out.”

Because here’s the truth—If I were Abraham... If I were somehow in his shoes... I wouldn’t take one step. Not one singular steps towards fulfilling God’s request. It’s that grotesque. It’s that unthinkable. “Abraham, take your son, your only son Isaac whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering to me.”

But as the story goes, Abraham does take a step. And then another... until he finds himself obeying the One he has been following ever since God came calling at Haran.

He grabs some wood, takes his beloved son, and they journey up a mountain together. When they reach the spot, Abraham builds an altar. And then... he binds his son. And in what I can only imagine was a flood of tears from both father and son—neither understanding what in was going on or why it was happening—Abraham reaches out his hand and takes a knife.

And at this point it seems to me that God’s word in Scripture is more of a horror scene than a love story. How can the God who keeps God’s promises ask Abraham to kill the child of promise? What about love? What about grace? What about life?

But at last, as Abraham’s knife-wielding hand trembles in the air, finally, we realize that God has seen enough, too. “Abraham! Abraham!” God shouts down. “Don’t lay your hand on the boy. Don’t do anything to harm him.”

Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught in a bush. So he takes the ram to use as an offering instead of his beautiful, beloved son. And as Genesis reads, “Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will provide.’” Because that, according to Abraham, is what God does. God provides the way.

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Now, many a preacher and theologian much smarter than I have offered many an interpretation on this passage. Some seem to make more sense than others, and some raise very valid questions. Like...

Is this a literal story of God testing Abraham, or is this more of metaphor to illustrate how far our trust in God should lead us?

Does God really expect such radical obedience, or is this lesson more about God’s provisions of grace even amid situations that seem horrible beyond our understanding?

Honestly, I'd be lying if I said I completely understand this story which the father in me cannot completely comprehend.

Instead, what I can affirm, even amid this passage, is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ reveals that life and love are God's desires for us. Life—not death—is what God wills for us. Love—not violence—is God's greatest hope for humanity. Even when things seem bleak... Even when we think God is against us... Even when we think God is asking us to do the impossible... God promises to be with us.

Abraham's story alone is filled with such testimony.

We remember that God provided the way for Abram and Sarai to make it safely from Haran to Canaan.

And we remember that even when it seemed that Sarah and Abraham would never have a child, God provided the way with Isaac.

And when Sarah, in a jealous fit, told Abraham to banish his slave Hagar and their little boy, Ishmael, God provided a way for Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness, even growing an entire nation through Ishmael that we know today as Islam.

So by the time we arrive at Genesis 22 and witness God asking the unthinkable... even then, and perhaps, especially then, the grief and pain we witness in this story is resolved with nothing less than God's provisions of life and love.

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In this way, what Genesis promises... what the God of Abraham reveals over and over again is that God will provide a way forward for us... in times of peace and in times of immense vulnerability... in times of plenty and in times of poverty... in times of clarity and times of confusion... even when nothing makes sense and everything seems antithetical to what society and culture have taught us... God will provide a way.

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It's a similar lesson to what Jesus is trying to teach his disciples in our lesson from Matthew this morning. For it is here, in Chapter 10, that Jesus summons his 12 disciples and commissions them to go out on their first major mission. So it is here... at last... that the disciples make the transition from simply following Jesus... to doing the ministry he had empowered them to do.

But it wouldn't be easy. Amid their commissioning, Jesus offers them "the following instructions: 'Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go,

proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers,” he told them. “You have received without payment, so give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey... just the clothes on your back. That, and my power, are all you need.”

As you might imagine, the disciples aren’t particularly eager to go amid instructions like these. Their fear was very real.

So in response to their fear, Jesus sought to drive home two points.

First, he made clear—as disciples of the living Lord, as disciples who are called to follow and fulfill the will of God in the world, we must never, not now and not ever, let fear be the reason we fail to do what the Lord would ask. For fear, Jesus says... fear is what prevents disciples from living out the Gospel. Fear is the difference between knowing what God desires, and actually doing what God desires. Fear of judgement—being made fun of. Fear of rejection—being cast out instead of welcomed in. Fear of loss—being asked to give up more than you want to give. Fear of our own personal safety. The list goes on. But the point remains the same. According to Jesus, disciples must never let fear prevent them from doing what faith requires.

His second point? “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. And whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones (to whom I’m sending you) in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” We may not think of it as so, but in truth, Jesus’ message to his disciples is as laughable as God’s promise of a child to a 100 year old barren couple.

For what Jesus proclaims to those 12 as well as to us is that, while God can and sometimes does intervene directly in the affairs of the world, God usually uses disciples to do God’s work in the world.

Which is why Jesus says that when someone welcomes you when you’re offering ministry... they’re also welcoming Christ.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” he tells us.

And lest we think the goal of serving Christ by serving others is too tall a task... (as we shared with our children) Jesus emphasizes that our service doesn’t have to be grand, radical gestures like burnt offerings or miraculous healings to be made meaningful? Even something as simple as a cup of cold water to one in need can have divine consequences.

As David Lose puts it. “Discipleship doesn’t have to be heroic. Like all the small acts of devotion, tenderness, and forgiveness that go largely unnoticed but tend to the relationships that are most important to us, so also the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures. Except that, according to Jesus, there is no small gesture. Anything done in faith and love has cosmic significance for the ones involved and, indeed, for the world God loves so much.”<sup>1</sup>

- Even giving food to the homeless man under the bypass;
- Even sitting down next to the lonely kid in the lunchroom;
- Even giving a hug to your grieving co-worker;
- Even listening, instead of talking, to the one who simply needs to be heard;
- Even reducing your carbon footprint, if just a bit;
- Even packing a backpack of food so a student can eat on the weekend.
- Even stepping up and stepping out on a weeklong mission trip.
- Even telling someone who doesn’t know how loved they are that that there is a place and a people here at Towson Presbyterian Church who will love them and accept them in Jesus’ name just as they are—without condition.

*(Drumbeat begins to play very softly)*

Through each of these and infinitely more ways, friends, we make immeasurable differences in the lives of others, as God uses us to help provide the way for others. As God includes us as co-creators of the kingdom of God on earth that even now is trying to break forth.

So let me ask you... do you hear it? Can you hear great rhythm of the kingdom breaking in.

*(Drumbeat gets louder)*

Can you hear that beautiful rhythm? God providing the way for us... that we might provide the way for others. *Pause for people to listen to the rhythm*

*(Drumbeat gets louder still)*

Can you feel it? That captivating beat repeating itself over and over again. God providing for us. And we, in turn, being God’s provisions for others. God providing for us... and we, in turn, providing for others... God providing for us... and we, in turn, providing for others.

Listen for the rhythm friends. The rhythm of God’s provisions. Listen to it. Feel it. And join the dance! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, [workingpreacher.com](http://workingpreacher.com), 2014