

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
WILLMAR, MN
JUNE 28, 2020**



Prelude

Preparing Our Hearts

“Though I May Speak (The Gift of Love)”

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Though I may speak with bravest fire,
and have the gift to all inspire,
and have not love, my words are vain,
as sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess,
and striving so my love profess,
but not be given by love within,
the profit soon turns strangely thin.

Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control;
our spirits long to be made whole.
Let inward love guide every deed;
by this we worship, and are freed.

Welcome to Worship

Friends, we are doing worship in a new way during this season. The sanctuary is empty, but we are still the church. The church has always been the people, not the building in which we gather. Even if we cannot be together in this place, we are together in worship today by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and by the digital signal that helps us connect to one another.

Wherever you are, and whether you are watching it live or as a recording, this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Opening Prayer

Let us confess our sins to God,
whose loving kindness endures forever.

O Lord, you taught us to love you and love our neighbor, but we have not lived in right relationship or walked in the light of your love. Forgive us for the wrongs we have done; we know the wages of sin is death. Yet we trust in your gift of forgiveness, which is freedom and life in Christ. Amen.

Sisters and brothers, your sins are forgiven by the mercy of Christ.
Be at peace, for you have been freed from sin
that you may serve with righteousness, to the glory and praise of God.

Opening Hymn

“I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light”

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I want to walk as a child of the light. I want to follow Jesus.
God set the stars to give light to the world. The star of my life is Jesus.
In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike.
The lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

I want to see the brightness of God. I want to look at Jesus.
Clear Sun of righteousness, shine on my path,

and show me the way to the Father.
In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike.
The lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

I'm looking for the coming of Christ. I want to be with Jesus.
When we have run with patience the race, we shall know the joy of Jesus.
In him there is no darkness at all. The night and the day are both alike.
The lamb is the light of the city of God. Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

Scripture Lesson

Genesis 22:1-14

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ²He said, 'Take your son, 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.' ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt-offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' ⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt-offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' ⁸Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together. ⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ¹²He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' ¹³And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt-offering instead of his

son. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place ‘The LORD will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’

Message

“The God Who Sees” Rev. Scott L. Thompson

Today’s text is one of the more difficult passages in scripture. It begs questions and leaves us to ponder them long after our hearing. For ease of organization, I’ve arranged my message into three parts to help us address them: Testing, Sacrifice, and Providence.

First of all, what is the purpose of God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his son? Was it a test of Abraham’s faithfulness? In short yes, the very first words of the chapter tell us, “After these things God tested Abraham.” (22:1) This may have you wondering, is that something God does – test people? A close examination of scripture reveals numerous tests of faithfulness, such as here with Abraham, the whole of the book which is the test of the faith of Job, in the book of Kings, the people are tested as they are tempted by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel to follow foreign gods. In the New Testament, Jesus takes up the idea of testing by teaching the disciples to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6: 13).

Abraham is probably tested this way because despite his enthusiastic acceptance of the covenant with God which we learn about throughout the book of Genesis – that God will make a great nation of him; that his descendants will number as the stars; that Abraham left his homeland to answer God’s call to enter the promised land – Abraham had at least twice lost his confidence in God’s leading and pretended his wife Sarah was his sister because he feared foreign kings (Genesis 12 and 20).

So, if God tests God’s followers, is this something we should be fearful of? Is God going to give us some impossible test like Abraham? If that is something that causes you anxiety let me give you some reassurances. Speaking to the topic of testing, the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10: 13, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” We can take some

solace here – first of all, that testing is common to everyone. As a person of faith, we will face tests and trials. It is a normal part of life. Whenever we make significant choices in our careers, our families, our relationships, are we not making an ethical choice that reflects on a test of our ideals? Indeed, it's one thing to have an ideal, but it only exists in our minds unless it is lived. An ideal that is lived out becomes something more than an ideal, it becomes a lived value as it is manifested in the world. The way that Jesus has called us to live is much more than an abstract set of ideals. There are real ethical implications to our choices once we chose to become a disciple of Jesus. We are tested each day as we choose whether to follow Jesus' teaching. Do we choose to follow the Golden Rule? Do we choose to follow the path of discipleship? Each choice is a mini-test.

It's also important at this point to state that these tests are always tests of our faith – whether our ideals carry over into our actions. They are not trails of suffering. I do not believe God frivolously inflicts suffering on the faithful. Suffering is an inescapable part of life, and enduring suffering is another topic altogether. Here we are talking about the testing that comes with being faithful and enduring temptation.

And so it is reassuring that we also learn in the verse from Corinthians that, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength.” And that, “with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” In other words, when we are tested we need to seek strength from God – through prayer, scripture, and the encouragement of Christian fellowship – to make it through, and God promises to provide. And even when we fail the test, we can be sure of God's grace to forgive us. Remember the Apostle Peter? On the night of Jesus' betrayal and arrest, Peter denied Jesus three times. And yet, Jesus did not forsake him or abandon him. Indeed, Peter was forgiven and went on to become the leader of the early church. As Paul writes, God's “grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12: 9).

In summary, does God test? It seems so. Does God give us temptations which are more than we can handle without him? It seems not. If we mess up, is there grace and forgiveness along the way? Certainly. Just pray that we are never tested like Abraham!

Which brings us to the second topic: sacrifice. The idea that God might ask Abraham to sacrifice his son assaults our sensibilities. It is shocking, provoking us to ask, “what sort of God asks his followers to sacrifice children to him?” In fact that is precisely the sort of question the text is intending to provoke. Did you notice something curious, that when God asks for this sacrifice, that Abraham doesn’t blink an eye; that there he doesn’t offer protest or outcry to God? Protesting or bargaining with God was certainly something Abraham was capable of, just a few chapters earlier, he bargains with God, pleading with God to spare the residents of Sodom, “What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?” Abraham pleads with God in Genesis chapter 18. But here, Abraham simply gathers his animals and servants and off he goes.

Why? Because in the ancient near east, this was something the gods asked of their followers. Remember that Abraham and his people were one small tribe in a sea of surrounding kingdoms. Each with their own gods and practices. And in those kingdoms and in those days the gods of those places were an angry lot. They demanded appeasement in order to provide good harvest, for the rains to come, for the fertility of the animals, and for victory in war. And to appease these angry gods, blood was demanded. And it was not uncommon throughout the Mediterranean world for this blood to be supplied with that of the follower’s children. So, when Abraham learns that God is asking him for the blood of Isaac, he must have thought that this is the way of things, and so he went on his way.

Except that we have the small question posed by Isaac as they approach the moment in question and he asks where is the lamb for the offering, and Abraham answers, “⁸‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together.” Almost as if Abraham knew that this story might have a twist at the end.

And that twist at the end is our third topic: Providence - that God provides. The story takes us to that dramatic moment when the knife is raised over Isaac’s bound and prostrate body, when the voice of God speaks and a ram is provided in Abraham’s place, provoking Abraham to call, “‘The LORD will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’” And here the larger point about sacrifice is brought home. And that point is this: That the God of Abraham was not like the Gods of other tribes and nations. God was not an angry god fuming with displeasure at his

followers only to be satiated by the sacrifice of follower's children. Instead, Abraham learns, "The Lord will provide." Instead of needing an endless stream of escalating sacrifices in order to provide the rain, the harvest, the fertility of the homes and fields, God has turned that all on its head. Instead of being the God who takes – who demands blood in appeasement - God reveals Godself to be the God who provides: The rain; the harvest; the fruit of the field; indeed, all of those things! Not because of our outpouring of sacrifice, but because of God's outpouring of love.

So earlier we made this audacious claim that God tests. Here we are putting that in tension with the equally audacious claim that God also provides. Indeed, the Hebrew word for *provide*, "ra-ah," means *to see*. To say that God *sees* means that God anticipates our needs even before we know them ourselves and is already moving to provide a response before we can even think to respond. The movement is from an ancient misunderstanding of God who was thought to demand sacrifice, through this story of Abraham, Isaac, and the ram, into a truer understanding that we worship a "God who sees." A God who provides.

In our Reformed theological tradition we call this concept *providence*. Providence is the idea that God sees us, anticipates our needs before we even comprehend them, and is moving to meet those needs in accordance to God's plan and purpose for our lives. As Walter Bruggeman writes, "The narrative begins with the testing by God. But the narrative ends with God providing. That statement may be taken for granted. But it is not less problematic. It is no less an act of radical faith on the part of Abraham to concede the last statement than to accept the first statement. To assert that God *provides* requires a faith as intense as does the conviction that God *tests*. It affirms that God, only God and none other, is the source of life. Abraham's enigmatic statement [that God will provide for the offering in response to Isaac's query in verse 8] and the conclusion [where we find the ram in the bushes] confess that the alternate ram did not appear by accident, by nature, or by good fortune. They mean, rather, that the same God who set the test in *sovereignty* is the one who resolved the test in *graciousness*. In a world beset by humanism, scientism, and naturalism, the claim that God alone provides is as scandalous as the claim that he tests."¹

¹ Bruggeman, Walter. "Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Genesis." John Knox Press. Atlanta. 1982. Pg. 191.

So what does this all mean for us in our lives of faith? First of all, it begs us to ask, what false gods are we sacrificing our children to? We may not name them gods as the ancients did, but what evils are we offering not just our children, but our very selves to, in our misguided false worship? Do the throes of violence and protest following the death of George Floyd point to a misguided ideology of racial superiority as a false god that has exacted its share of blood over the centuries of our nation's existence? Is our pursuit of money a false god that takes its pound of flesh, as we imperil the very existence of our planet with our heedless extraction of resources with no regard for the consequences? Are our unrealistic and unattainable ideals of beauty and perfection on TV and magazine covers which lead our kids to starve themselves and drive themselves to mental illness a contemporary false god? Where do you see the false gods lurking in our culture? Who is falling prey to their bloody altars?

In contrast, we are called to trust in God who sees. God who provides. God who gave us this good earth to enjoy and preserve for our children's children. God who saw that we needed convincing evidence of his providence, so in a resounding fashion became flesh and dwelt among us. Who, in Jesus, taught us that He is the way, and the truth, and the life. Jesus, who taught us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. And instead of blood sacrifice, asks us to, "Pick up your cross and follow [him]," to become his disciples, to go where he leads us, as we trust in God who sees, and who provides.

Alleluia and Amen.

Hymn of Affirmation

"Great Is Thy Faithfulness"

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Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father;
there is no shadow of turning with thee.
Thou changest not; thy compassions they fail not.
As thou hast been thou forever wilt be.

Refrain:

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning, new mercies I see.
All I have needed thy hand hast provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above
join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love. [Refrain]

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow:
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside! [Refrain]

Prayers of Intercession

Creator of all things seen and unseen,
you blew the Spirit of Christ
into apostles and disciples
enslaved by sin,
freeing your people from death
and captivating us with your steadfast love.
You raised the body of Christ,
the church in the world,
to proclaim the good news of salvation.
For the sake of the world we pray,
Come, Lord Jesus!

We pray for all whom you call
into the work of the church.
May they know the presence of your Spirit
to strengthen, guide, correct, comfort, and challenge.

We pray for all whose lives are touched
by the church's witness.
May they feel the healing hands of Christ Jesus
serving them with gentleness, kindness, grace, and love.

We pray for the world
into which you call the church.
Help us to be faithful in giving ourselves away
for the sake of the gospel.
In your Spirit,
let us show the peace of Christ to a world of violence,
share the bread of heaven with a world of hunger,
offer springs of living water to a world of pollution,
and lead the way of truth and life
with the gifts of faith, hope, and love,
until you bring the fulness of your new creation.
Then and now we rejoice with the multitudes:
praise, honor, and glory to you, Holy Trinity,
in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

And now, with the confidence of the children of God,
we pray the prayer which Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Invitation to the Offering

Friends, we cannot pass an offering plate online. I want to thank you for continuing to give generously, sending your offerings to the church. Your gifts allow us to continue to be the church. So, I would like to take this moment to say thank you, and to bless the offerings you have made this week: your financial gifts; and your lives offered to God's service. Let us pray...

Offering Prayer

Faithful God, we give you thanks
that you have entrusted us with
the gift of hospitality and generosity,
and that you have set us free

to be generous givers
of the gifts you so freely give to us.
May our offerings this day
draw us closer to you
as we share them with others
for righteousness' sake. Amen.

Closing Hymn

“Come! Live in the Light! (We Are Called)”

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Come! Live in the light!
Shine with the joy and the love of the Lord!
We are called to be light for the kingdom,
to live in the freedom of the city of God.

Refrain:

We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God.

Come! open your heart!
Show your mercy to all those in fear!
We are called to be hope for the hopeless
so hatred and violence will be no more. [Refrain]

Sing! Sing a new song!
Sing of that great day when all will be one!
God will reign, and we'll walk with each other
as sisters and brothers united in love. [Refrain]

Charge and Benediction

Learn the ways of God, for they are the ways of life.
Trust in Jesus Christ, the Son, for he is the way to God.
Live by the power of the Holy Spirit, who will show you the love of Jesus.

May the one who creates, redeems, and sustains you

from everlasting to everlasting
grant you the grace of peace, holiness, and eternal life.
Alleluia! Amen.