

Lent 1

Genesis 22:1-18

February 18, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Celebrate God's Substitute!

Have you ever looked back at your life and recognized God's guiding hand? For example, the circumstances that came together for you to meet your spouse, or how you ended up in your career? I look back over my life and see MANY times how the Lord guided things in order to help me, especially to strengthen my faith. I knew about the true God – we all did since the worldwide flood wasn't too far in the past. Still, I treated him as some sort of absent landlord, not really connected to what was going on here on earth. I prayed to some household gods like they were good luck charms. I'm not proud of that. Then one day the Lord spoke directly to me. (He doesn't do that anymore since the Bible is completed.) He told me to move from my hometown of Ur, near Babylon, to Haran. It was hard leaving others behind as well our house. But when God himself tells you to do something, you do it.

After we lived in Haran a few years, the Lord told me to move to Canaan. Again, it was difficult to leave loved ones behind. I was, literally, living in a foreign land. The Canaanites around me could have easily killed me. I realize now that the Lord was teaching me to trust in him. I did not blend in with the Canaanites around me, which was good. God was making sure that I was not influenced by people who would encourage me to pray to false idols.

When we moved to Canaan, I was 75 years old and my wife, Sarah, was 65. The Lord told us that we would have a son. (4000 years ago, people lived a bit longer so it wasn't too much of a stretch for people our age to have a child.) The Lord also said that the promised Savior would be born from our son's family tree. How exciting. Then we waited. Each month was an emotional roller coaster of hope and disappointment. Ten years later and we still did not have a son. That's when Sarah told me to sleep with her personal servant named Hagar. That was not too uncommon in that part of the world and the child would be considered the wife's child. Hagar gave birth to a son. But then Sarah and Hagar did not get along and Sarah yelled at me for sleeping with her. I'm not too proud of that either. Meanwhile, Sarah and I got too old to have children. It seemed as if God forgot about his promise to us. All along, the Lord was teaching me to trust in his Word. He said he would give us a son and he would.

When I was 99 years old and Sarah was 89, the Lord told us that we would have a son within a year. His Word was like a steroid shot to our bodies. Sarah gave birth and we named him "Isaac" as we laughed with joy and delight. He became the center of our universe – not just because we finally had a son, but because we knew that the Savior from sin and death would come through him. When he was about 15 years old, the Lord called out to me again. "**Here I am,**" I replied. I could hardly believe my ears when God told me to take Isaac to a special mountain named Moriah and to sacrifice him like I would sacrifice a lamb – completely burning him up on an altar. I was horrified and confused, but when God tells you to do something, you do it.

I barely slept at all that night. Early in the morning, I cut the wood we needed and told Isaac and two servants to come along with me. Mt. Moriah was 50 miles away and it took us three days to get there. The others could tell that I was uneasy, troubled, so no one talked to me. What kept spinning through my mind was – God said that the promised Messiah would come through Isaac's family tree. But if Isaac was dead, then there would be no family tree and, therefore, no Savior. Still, I knew that God's Word is always true. Since God said that the Savior would come through Isaac, the only explanation I could come up with was that after Isaac was sacrificed, God would raise him from the dead. It made more sense that Isaac would be raised from the dead than that God's Word could be wrong.

When we got to the base of Mt. Moriah, I had the servants stay there. I did not want them to see what was going to happen. Besides, they probably would have tried to stop me. Isaac and I slowly and somberly trudged to the top of the mountain. He broke the awkward silence, "**Father, the fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?**" A tear fell down my cheek and my voice cracked a bit as I swallowed hard and said, "**God himself will provide the lamb.**" I did not lie, but I couldn't tell him that HE was the one who was going to be sacrificed.

When we reached the top of the mountain, we moved heavy stones to make the altar. Think of a large box made of stones. We put kindling and lots of brush and wood inside to burn. Then we laid other wood across the stones in a crisscross pattern. Isaac's eyes got huge and his face turned white when I told him to hold out his hands so that I could tie them together. A 15-year-old boy could easily outrun a 115 year old man, but Isaac never resisted or complained or tried to run away. Then I

told him to lay down on the wood as I tied his legs together. My hand was shaking as I took out my knife and moved it toward his neck. **“Abraham! Abraham!”** God called out in a loud voice. **“Here I am,”** I cried. He told me not to kill Isaac after all. He explained that this was all a test to see if I loved God more than I loved Isaac. Of course, the Lord already knew what was in my heart and how I would respond, but I did not. Once again, the Lord was guiding things in my life to strengthen my faith. Through all of this, I became super aware that I really did love God more than I loved Isaac. I knew that no matter what, God was going to keep his promise of sending a Savior through Isaac’s family tree. In the end, I trusted in God even more.

Through the different trials I faced during my life, the Lord kept strengthening my trust in him, so that when it was time for me to close my eyes in death, I had complete confidence in what was going to happen. I was simply going to leave behind this broken world and go to eternal life in heaven with a perfect body. Each and every one of you will someday pass through the same doorway of death. You will close your eyes in this world and open them in heaven. There are not any videos or pictures of heaven for you to look at – no travel brochures. There is no scientific, or empirical, evidence that heaven exists. You have to trust God’s Word. In order to strengthen your faith for that moment, the Lord permits different trials, or tests, in your life. I doubt if the Lord will ask you to sacrifice your son, but you have faced other difficult situations. Maybe you have dealt with cancer or some other disease. Maybe you or a loved one suffered a stroke. Maybe you lost your job and have to figure out a new career. Maybe you suffered some sort of accident. Maybe you struggled with infertility like my Sarah did. Maybe there was a time when you did not have enough money to buy groceries. Think of a time when you cried, “Why God? What am I going to do God?” For as difficult as that moment was for you, you were looking to the Lord and holding on to him even tighter.

After the Lord stopped me from sacrificing Isaac, I noticed a ram that was stuck in some bushes by its horns. I untied Isaac, who helped me bring the ram to the altar. We slit that ram’s throat and laid it on the altar to burn it up. The Lord provided a substitute so that Isaac did not have to be sacrificed. I was crying tears of joy I was so thankful! I called that place “The Lord Will Provide.” For the rest of my life, whenever I thought about this event, I remembered that the Lord provided for us. Isaac did have a family tree and the Savior was finally born who took

away the sins of the whole world and guaranteed eternal life for all who believe in him.

The Lord was very specific that he wanted the sacrifice performed on Mt. Moriah. Maybe you noticed that name. That mountain was later called Mt. Zion. On that mountain, King David build the capitol city of Jerusalem and his son, Solomon, built the temple. For several centuries, animals were burned up on an altar in front of that temple. Every sacrificed animal was a reminder of that ram that the Lord provided. You see, every sinner deserves God’s punishment. We all know what guilt feels like. You do something wrong and you have that feeling that you should suffer in some way for it. Instead of punishing the sinner, though, God said he would accept a substitute. On Mt. Moriah, the Lord provided a substitute so that Isaac was not sacrificed. In that same space, on the same mountain, the Lord provided a substitute for the whole world, his one and only son, Jesus Christ. I did not have to witness my son’s death on Mt. Moriah, but God saw his Son die there. Rather than let you and I die and suffer hell because of our sins, God had Jesus experience that in our place! How can some people say that God is not loving? He loved you to death. Since Jesus lived a perfect life and gave you credit for it, since Jesus died the innocent death he did not deserve to pay for your sins, and since Jesus rose from the dead with a glorified body, you can be sure that you are saved! And if God already did all of that for you, you can trust him to help you with other things in your life.

From my story of Isaac’s near sacrifice, I hope you have been reminded a bit to trust God’s Word and do what God tells you, even if you do not always understand what’s going on in your life or why. You can trust ...

- that his angels are guarding you.
- that he is guiding your life with a loving purpose.
- that he hears and answers your prayers.
- that he is working all things together for your eternal good.
- that he adopted you and gave you faith when you were baptized.
- that Jesus’ very body and blood are present in the Lord’s Supper for the individual forgiveness of all your sins.
- that he loves you and that you will one day be in heaven.

God saved you by sending Jesus to be your substitute. Give thanks and celebrate God’s substitute. Amen.