

**Genesis 22:1-18 + Turn to the Lord Who Provides Deliverance + Series: Turn to the Lord
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 1st Sunday in Lent + 18 February 2018**

It was the worst week of his life. The week had started out so well. Abraham had recently made a treaty with a local king settling a dispute over a well. That provided some peace for Abraham and his household as they herded his vast flocks around the region. Family life had settled down. By this time, Abraham was about 115 years old. Sarah, his beloved wife, was about 105. Their son Isaac was in his teens, developing into a strong, gifted young man who, like his father, trusted in the true God. Things were going great. Life was good until God came to **“test”** his servant Abraham.

This wasn't like the ACT or SAT or exams you take in school or even like a behind-the-wheel test at the DMV. God had come to **“test”** Abraham's faith, to test the strength and genuineness of his trust in the Lord. It was going to be a very difficult test that would make abundantly clear where Abraham's heart was focused—on God or on Isaac. This test would put Abraham through the worst week of his life.

God said to him, **“Abraham!”** Abraham was one of the few believers who had the opportunity to personally converse with the Lord, so this wasn't unusual. How he came to Abraham we don't know, but Abraham was more than eager to speak with his dear Friend. **“Here I am!”**

God didn't bother with pleasantries. He simply went to the test, and it required Abraham to do the unimaginable. God said to him, **“Take your son...your only son...the one whom you love...Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”** Huh? What was God asking him? Why would God ask him to do that after all the time and effort God had put into providing Isaac to his parents and all the waiting they had had to do?

After all, decades had passed since God had first called Abraham to pack up and move to a strange, new land. Decades had passed since God had made the first promise to Abraham that his offspring would one day possess that land, but more importantly, through his offspring **“all nations on earth will be blessed.”** (Genesis 12:3)

After that first promise, Abraham and Sarah had to wait 25 years for God to fulfill that promise. Plus it wasn't like God had made that promise to Abraham and Sarah when they were young newlyweds. He was 75 and she was 65! At age 90, fifteen years after the first promise, Abraham almost gave up on God's promise, but the Lord visited his friend again and reassured him.

After waiting nine more years, the Lord had come to them in person and told them that a year later they would have a son. After all that time, you can understand why Sarah laughed to herself, but when Abraham reached 100 and Sarah 90, Isaac was born and her laughter of doubt became laughter of joy. Along the way, the Lord had protected his promise from hostile folks and good intentions, but then **“God tested Abraham”** and it seemed like everything was about to come to a crashing halt.

Why would God ask Abraham to do that? Why would God ask Abraham to do what God condemns—to actually sacrifice his son? Was the all-knowing God unsure of what faith was in Abraham's heart? Was it just a cruel trick?

Looking back, plenty of questions come to our minds, but Abraham didn't confront God with them. He had the toughest test of his life before him and completing that test would be heart wrenching. That week would seem like the worst week of his life, but Abraham did not hesitate to do the Lord's will.

He went to bed after God had given him the assignment. You wonder how much sleep he got that night or if he even told Sarah about what God had said. He got up early the next morning getting right to work preparing for the unpleasant task ahead. Moriah was a three-day journey, so they needed to be prepared. He saddled his donkey and **“cut enough wood for the burnt offering.”** Perhaps he was trying to keep his mind off of the inevitable as Abraham did what he normally did to prepare for a sacrifice to the Lord. But each action must have been agonizing—packing and saddling and cutting wood. Then **“he took with him two of his servants”** and Isaac, his son, and they **“set out for the place God had told him about.”**

Every step, every mile brought them closer to that awful moment when he would have to sacrifice Isaac. We don't hear about the trip there or the conversations along the way, but you can imagine how the evil one tried to twist Abraham's thoughts to doubt God's will. “Does God really love you? Does he really understand what he's putting you through? What about his promises to you? Will he keep them? Why don't you just give up?” After three agonizing days, **“Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.”**

He told his servants, ***“Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”*** Funny that Abraham would say that. Why would he say they were coming back? Was it wishful thinking or did he believe that? Leaving the servants and donkey behind, Abraham took the wood and placed it on his son’s shoulders. Isaac was strong enough to carry a load of wood up a mountain. Abraham ***“carried the fire and the knife,”*** but Isaac’s next comment cut Abraham.

“My father?” “Yes, my son?” “The fire and the wood are here...but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Was Abraham trying to distract his son from putting two and two together or did he truly believe that? ***“...The two of them went on together.”***

They climbed the mountain. When they got to ***“the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there...”*** out of rocks. He carefully arranged the wood so it would provide a consuming fire. Then ***“he bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.”*** Considering that Abraham had not revealed to Isaac what God had commanded, you would expect the young man’s “fight or flight” instinct to kick in, but he didn’t. He willingly and quietly allowed himself to be prepared for sacrifice. The moment had come.

With tears in his eyes Abraham lifted the knife ***“to slay his son.”*** In another moment his son would be dead, but God had commanded this. Just as the knife was about to come slicing down, ***“the...LORD called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’” “Here I am,”*** he replied staring at his bound son on the altar with the sacrificial knife still in the air. ***“Do not lay a hand on the boy...Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”***

Just as Abraham’s life and Isaac’s life were about to crash, the Lord provided deliverance. The Lord provided a way out. At that moment, Abraham looked up from his son to see an alternative, another to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place. ***“There in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son.”*** The Lord provided a substitute to be sacrificed for Abraham’s beloved son. ***“So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide”—literally “The LORD will see to it.”*** The Lord had seen to their deliverance as he provided an alternate sacrifice for Isaac.

How was Abraham able to keep going, to so willingly obey the Lord’s command and offer up his son for sacrifice? What sustained him during his worst week ever? The writer of the book of Hebrews explains, ***“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”*** (11:17-19)

Abraham trusted in the Lord. He trusted that God had the power to keep his promises, even if it meant raising Isaac back from the dead. In a sense, that’s what the Lord did, even as he refined Abraham’s trust in him like gold being refined by fire. Then on top of all that, the Lord blessed him with familiar promises. ***“I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore...And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”***

As you look back on your life, do you recall when you had your worst week, your worst month, your worst year? I can think of a handful of times—a single week, a few months, an entire year—that in the moment felt like the worst periods of time in my life. You look back on those times in your life, especially when you were in the middle of them, and you start to understand how Abraham felt as he journeyed to Moriah with the son he had to sacrifice.

You can hear the tempting voice of the evil one or your own sinful nature whispering in your ear or the people around you telling you, “Does God really care? Does he really know what’s going on in your life? Why would he put you through such a struggle? Why don’t you just give up?” During that time of testing, you’re tempted to give up on the Lord or seek help anywhere else. Yet God sustained you. God sustained your faith in him even as you felt more helpless the farther along you went.

When it was over, when the worst had passed, what do you find looking back? You’re different. You’ve grown in maturity or in wisdom or in faith in the Lord or in your confidence in him alone. Perhaps you even feel older, but looking back, you see that the Lord was the one who got you through it. The Lord was the one who “saw to” all your needs. The Lord was the one who “provided” deliverance.

Why is that? The Lord who provided you help and deliverance during those difficult times of testing is the Lord who provided deliverance through his Son, his only Son, his Son whom he loved, Jesus. The Lord did not

withhold his Son, his only Son. Unlike Abraham and Isaac, there was no alternate route, no other way out, no deliverance for Jesus. He was the deliverance. That's why Jesus had to be conceived, had to be born, had to grow up, and had to live a life that could not stray from God's holy will even for a second. Jesus had to be tempted by the devil. He had to face opposition from the world he came to deliver. Jesus had to go through an entire lifetime of struggle and testing, even "worst" times like we face. Jesus had to go to the cross and the tomb. Jesus had to rise from the dead, because he was the ram in the thicket, the substitute sacrifice, the deliverance God promised to Abraham and Isaac and provided for you and me and this entire world full of sinners.

When life seems like it's going to crash, when it's one of those "worst" times of life, who can you turn to? You can't turn to yourself. You'll crumble. You can't turn to other, because they too are mortal. No, when life seems it's at its worst, you can only turn to the Lord for deliverance. During these Lenten days, when we are called to turn from our sins and live, to turn to the Lord our God even when we go through a "worst" week or month or year in our lives, we turn to the Lord who sees to our deliverance. We turn to the Lord who put himself in our place. We turn to the Lord who gives us comfort and help for grief and hurt in those "worst" times of life like all those families who lost loved ones earlier on Wednesday. Where do we turn? We turn to the Lord who provides. Amen.