

Pastor Luke C. Werre
February 21, 2021
Sermon Text: Genesis 22:1-18
Because of Christ's obedience:
Nothing can separate us from God's love.

FOCUS YOUR FAITH ON GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

What about when God appears to be the enemy?

I did not misspeak. What about when God appears to be the enemy – when He seems to go against His own promises, when He seems to be against you rather than for you?

I know of folks in Tennessee, in the recent ice storm, living in a rural area. Trees down everywhere. Roads blocked. No one could go in or out. They had no heat. No electricity. The temperature got down to 13 degrees. They were worried. They prayed for deliverance. God's answer? Another major winter storm right on the heels of the first one. "Dear God, did you hear us? You are salvation. You are the deliverer. We cried out to you for help. And this is your answer?"

It is hard even to contemplate Abraham's agony. Your son, your beautiful son! Whether it's loving tenderness for your little boy, or bursting pride in your young man we can't imagine the horror that Abraham must have been experiencing. Somehow - we don't know how - God had communicated to Abraham that he was to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice on a certain mountaintop.

Could a parent even comprehend it? Tying your child's hands and feet with rope, laying him on wood, plunging a knife into his heart, and reducing that radiant young skin to blackened ash?

As you read the account in Genesis 22 it even seems the Holy Spirit takes some kind of twisted pleasure in laying out detail after agonizing detail: how Abraham chopped the wood, loaded a donkey, traveled for two days, and so on. But the Holy Spirit's real purpose is to depict for us the torture of Abraham's soul.

Imagine the things that must have run through his mind: "Can this be right? Was I too proud of this son that God is now taking him away from me? Has God changed His mind about everything?"

Martin Luther made this comment: *Because Abraham is the foremost and greatest among the holy patriarchs, he endures truly patriarchal trials which his descendants would not have been able to bear.* It wasn't merely Abraham's adoration for his child that was at issue. Nor was it merely his personal desire for a legacy. He did receive Isaac as a miracle child – born to him when he was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. But something even larger was at stake. You see, God had promised to Abraham that from Isaac the promised Savior of the world, Jesus, would be descended. Process that for a second. Take away Isaac... and for all intents and purposes you take away the salvation of the world.

Would God do that? Somehow it was clear to Abraham that it was God communicating with him otherwise he would have had to assume this was from the devil. But would God contradict Himself like that? Would God suddenly become the enemy, not only requiring Abraham to do the unthinkable to his own flesh and blood, but also in the process to seal the world's doom?

There was only one way that Abraham survived this whole ghastly scenario. His faith was focused on God's faithfulness. God had promised that not only would a great nation come out of Isaac's body, but also that through him all nations on the earth would be blessed. God is faithful. God cannot go back on His Word. In the

New Testament book of Hebrews, the Holy Spirit tells us that Abraham reasoned that if he went through with it and sacrificed Isaac, God would have to raise Isaac from the dead. That's all there was to it. God is faithful. God cannot lie.

Ahhh! And if we look closely we see right here in Genesis 22 little evidences that Abraham's faith was focused on God's faithfulness. When he and Isaac left the servants behind he told them, "*Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*" When Isaac asked his father about the lamb for the burnt offering, Abraham's literal reply was, "*God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.*" Abraham trusted that things could not be the way they seemed. If he had to go through with this act, God would have to resurrect those ashes and restore Isaac's life. For God has promised and God is faithful. Only by focusing on God's faithfulness could Abraham be willing to give up everything, even his son. Only by focusing on God's faithfulness did Abraham survive this ordeal with faith intact.

God did prove faithful. He did not require Abraham to go through with it. He stopped Abraham short of the deed and then provided a ram as a substitute. Then to refresh Abraham's faith after this ordeal, God repeated to Abraham the same promise about Isaac and the coming Christ as He had so many times before. God reassured Abraham's faith as to say, "Now dry your tears, Abraham. Nothing has changed. It is the same as it ever was. I am still God, still faithful to my promises." Abraham must have felt like he was soaring on eagles' wings right then. Here in Genesis 22 God said, *I swear on myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.*

Ultimately, that offspring who blesses all nations is Christ. He has taken possession of the power of His enemies: sin, guilt, death, satan, hell, sorrow, and suffering. In the Gospel Lesson today He withstood satan's temptations like a Mighty Fortress. From there He proceeded all the way to the cross and then the empty tomb. God did not renege on His promise to accomplish our salvation in Jesus. For though God did not require Abraham to sacrifice his son, God still willingly sacrificed *His* Son. Therefore, focus *your* faith on God's faithfulness.

Your experiences may never be as extreme as Abraham's. Even so you've been in that dark place where everything seems wrong, where God seems to be going against His own promises. By virtue of your Baptism you know that you are chosen by God, a child of God, cherished by God, saved by God, sanctified by God, promised glory by God. But why does it seem to be the opposite? Why does it feel like God is being the enemy?

In such dark moments, take a lesson from Abraham and focus not on what you're feeling or how things look. Rather, focus your faith on God's faithfulness. There's a psalm that says, *Those whose hope is in him will never be put to shame.* In other words, you will never be proven a fool for trusting in God's faithfulness. He keeps His promises. He kept His promise to Abraham. He kept His promise to the world by sending Jesus. And now He also adds this promise to you: *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* As God refreshed Abraham's faith by repeating His promise about Isaac, let God refresh your faith by repeating His promise of salvation to you along with Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. As you receive the Sacrament you are assured God has not changed His mind. Your sins are still forgiven and He still intends to save you.

When God puts you through dark times, He is not toying with you. He is giving your faith a workout. He is sharpening your trust in His grace. He is training you to focus your faith on His faithfulness. And His faithfulness to His promises is all that matters. No earthly thing will save you. Only He. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, the result will be that you will love Him more intensely, that you will be more sure of salvation and that you will cling more tenaciously to the goal of heaven than ever before.

One day we will see every promise fulfilled beyond our wildest expectations when Christ returns in glory to take us to heaven. At that moment faith will be replaced with praise. For now, however, we must focus our faith on God's faithfulness.