

**God Will Provide**  
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For this first Sunday in Lent comes to us from the gospel of Mark, the first chapter:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son, with You I am well pleased." The spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel."

The gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, during the journey of Lent, we ask You to open our hearts and minds. We pray that You would lead and guide us in our lives and we ask You to help us to resist less those things that You call us to do in our lives. We pray that You would allow the temptations of our lives to have less pull on us and that those opportunities You provide for us to trust You will indeed strengthen our faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In the season of Lent, we're reminded of Jesus' journey to the cross. So it is a time when we are encouraged to strengthen our spiritual practices, taking maybe a little extra time for devotions and prayer or acts of service. There are some who set aside certain elements from their life during the Lenten season, give something up for Lent. I encourage you if you choose to do that that in the giving up of something, you would also take it as an opportunity to add moments of reflection for our dependence upon God and an opportunity of prayer and for God to lead and guide you in your life.

So we begin our Lenten Journey with these challenging texts for today. We begin with this text from Genesis 22, a difficult text, a problematic text in many ways, and in my scripture, it's entitled "God tested Abraham." I wonder sometimes if what's happening in this text is that Isaac, Abraham's son in the latter part of his life, the son that he waited 25 years for God to bring into his life, if maybe that gift from God hadn't started to become more important than the giver, than God Himself. I look to that to help guide me through this text as I struggle with it.

There's a question - will Abraham trust in God? After he waited all this time and saw God fulfill this promise in his life, as he comes to this point of tests, will he trust that God will guide him? Will he continue to be obedient, even when the request that comes from God seems so unreasonable?

There's an element in this response of Abraham throughout this text that is profound. When God calls Abraham, his response is "here, I am." When his son, Isaac later calls out to him, father, his response is "here, I am." When an angel speaks from heaven near the end of the story, he responds, "here, I am." He's presenting himself to serve God, to serve his son, to do whatever it is that God asks him to do. It is a spirit of service and obedience. Here, I am. How can I help? What would You have me do? I am available to You.

But I'm not sure that Abraham had any idea what would God would be asking him and I struggle with this text as God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. I can't even begin to imagine how Abraham heard that. I can't begin to imagine how Abraham didn't say, wait, what? Or, no God, anything but that. Or, who are you speaking to me? Because it seems so inconsistent with the character of who God is that he would be asked to do this.

Yet in this text, we hear none of that. All we see is Abraham responding and doing exactly what he was asked. It even says he gets up early the next morning. I don't understand. I would have delayed. I would have obfuscated. I would have made excuses. I would have delayed. I would have done anything to avoid it. And as I struggled with that question, the place that I came as I journeyed with this text over these last weeks was maybe when Abraham responds to his son's question, "Father, where is the lamb?" maybe he's being honest. Maybe he believes exactly what he says. God will provide. Maybe from the very beginning, Abraham knew that God was good and that if he put himself under God, as if he weren't there already, if he went along with whatever God asked him to do, that, in fact, God would lead and guide and God would provide.

My problem is that I don't often have the faith to believe God will provide. I sometimes need God to show me how You're going to provide. Then I'll believe. But it doesn't work that way. Step out in faith. God gives us that opportunity. He calls us. He tests us. The text tells us right from the beginning that God tests Abraham by asking him essentially will you do whatever I ask you to do, no matter what I ask you to do, because I'm asking.

I've said a few times in my life recently, if you know God is asking you to do something, there's only one option and that is to say yes because God is God, because He is supreme, because He does know all things, because we know that He loves us, and believe that He loves us. Whatever God asks us in our lives, our answer is yes or perhaps, I believe, help my unbelief.

Now I do want to throw in a qualifier here and it's a qualifier that fits this text very closely, even though it's nowhere in this text. That is that, if we think that we are being asked to do something that is out of alignment with God, which is exactly what Abraham was asked to do here, we need to follow the New Testament admonition to test the spirit, to check the text, to look to the Bible, to say is this in the character of God? To do this thing that I sense God is asking me to do? We need to call together our brothers and sisters in faith that we journey with in our faith journey and say this is what I hear God calling me to do. What do you think? How do you see it? Will you pray for me?

My struggle is, as I say that, I look at this story and I think this wouldn't have passed any of those tests. Yet that's exactly what God is asking of Abraham, to present himself as an obedient servant, even when he doesn't understand, to follow and do what he's asked to do, to believe God will provide.

The grace is the end of the story. The grace is that God does provide and in the end, we hear the angel say because you have done this and have not withheld your son. I wonder how often in our lives God might be able to say to us because we've been obedient and because we haven't withheld whatever it is He's asked of us, that He might say to us, you will be blessed for you have not withheld. I pray that as we grow in faith, as we grow in our belief that God is good and that God will provide, that we can offer all that we are, all that we have, trusting that God will be able to use it to His glory, for our blessing and for the blessing of others, that we will believe the God is good and God provides.

There's another element in this combination of texts which is also quite interesting. In James today, it says "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, ...for he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him." And then it says in verse 13, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil and He Himself tempts no one."

There's a distinction being made here that's hard for me to get a hold of. It's hard for me to grasp. The difference between a test or a trial and a temptation. Abraham wasn't being tempted. He was being tested. Sometimes in our lives, God tests us. God puts us through a trial to see if we will be obedient to Him, to see if we will trust Him, even beyond our own understanding at times. James goes on to say this about temptation, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death."

There's a lot of things that I, in my own desire, want. Often those things are not good for me, or for anyone else. They may taste good for a moment. They may seem to offer pleasure for a moment. They may

promise some sort of false sense of happiness ever after, if I just owned that Corvette or whatever else I might be tempted to buy or gain that I don't need, but that I want.

James is telling us here to be careful. Be careful about being guided by our desires. Be careful about believing the promise of satisfaction that is often in our commercials or marketing efforts that we see all around us every day. That, somehow, we will become attractive if we just have this toothbrush or this toothpaste. That, somehow, life will be better if we just drive this kind of car or dress this way or have this makeup.

God is the provider of all things. He's not testing us with those temptations, but He is reminding us that when we trust Him to lead and guide us in our lives, we're better off and the people around us are blessed. It doesn't mean life won't be difficult because often, it is. It doesn't mean that those choices won't be hard, impossibly hard, because, often, they are. It doesn't mean that we'll always live up to that, either by avoiding the temptation, or by trusting in God with what He calls us to do.

And so I struggled with this text. What is it that I can say? Where can we go? Because we failed the test and we fall to temptation. We act in disobedience to God and in obedience to our own desires. Where does that leave us? What are we supposed to do? Especially during this Lenten season, how is it that we can move forward, maybe grow a little bit more faith, maybe grow a little bit more obedience, maybe trust God just a little bit more in our lives.

For me, this week, some of the grace, some of the hope came in the form of the psalm, that responsive psalm that we read earlier in the service. "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul." I entrust my soul to my Lord. O my God, I trust in You. I look to You to give me purpose and direction. I look to You to make at least enough sense out of my life so I know where to go with the next step.

Then I looked at the third verse of Psalm 25 and I found something intriguing there. I read it in multiple translations and I'm going to put up on the screen there these three different translations of verse 3 of Psalm 25. The New Living Translation says, "No one who trusts in You will be disgraced." That same verse in the NIV is "No one who hopes in You will ever be put to shame." Then the English Standard Version says, "Indeed, none who wait for You shall be put to shame." Trust in You, hopes in You, waits for You. All from the same Bible, just choosing different words to share an idea.

I've always felt wonderful about the hope that we have in our Lord. I've always understood that believing in God means trusting in Him. I've not always been as excited about this idea of waiting for God. I tend, sometimes often, to be impatient. I sometimes just want God to do things on my timetable and well, it rarely happens. But I learned from these various translations, that hope relies on trust and that when I'm

trusting, I can wait with anticipation. I can wait with hope, knowing that God is good all the time. So, if I'm waiting to get better because I'm sick, or if I'm waiting to get direction because I'm not sure where to go, if I'm waiting for a call to come or a job to come or a letter to come, I can put my trust in God. I can wait without wondering about what the future holds because I can trust and hope in the God who holds the future. That attitude shift, that mental shift of understanding that I see because of these different translations of this verse allows me to recognize that that's what calling upon God is. That's what, when I say I give my soul to God, I trust in Him. It means that I trust that the future and the path and the journey that is ahead are God's journey for me, are God's journey for you, and that He, indeed, will lead and guide us and that God will provide.

That's life-giving good news, as we believe it. That's life-giving good news as it is proclaimed. No matter what is happening, no matter how deep your current struggle is know this. God provides. You can trust Him. You can wait in hope and He will indeed come through.

Our New Testament gospel today talks about the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as Jesus humbled himself before John, as He is baptized by John. Even though in other gospels, the story shows that there was a resistance to that because Jesus didn't need to repent and be baptized, but He was called to, so He did. We see that the Spirit immediately drives him out into the wilderness. We're not told in the Gospel of Mark exactly what happens in the wilderness. But we are told that it was 40 days. And we are told that he was tempted by Satan. Tempted, not tested, not tried, but tempted by Satan. We're also given the sense that this was a dangerous place to be when we are told that He was with the wild animals. But then we hear again this good news that the angels were ministering to Him. That, in the midst of this temptation, in the midst of this wilderness, in the midst of this scarcity, of hunger, God provided for Jesus through the angels.

Psalm 25 continued in verses four and five when the psalmist says to God not only do I lift up my soul to You, but I make a request. "Make me know Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; for You I wait all the day long." NLT says, "All day long I put my hope in You."

Here's the thing. We're not necessarily going to like everything that happens in our lives. We're not going to like it when life is hard and the struggle is probably most of the time. But let's at least be intellectually honest with ourselves. The struggles are how we learn. God does indeed teach us in those moments when we put our trust in Him because we don't know what else we can do, because we don't see the way forward and we wait in hope. We learn to trust in God. We learn the goodness of God as He uses

those difficult situations, those trials of our lives, to shape us and bless us and make us strong, to bless us so that we can be a blessing to others.

I hope you can look back, as I can, to some of the difficulties you've been through in your life and see how you've been able to use the consolations you yourselves have received from God to bring that same consolation and encouragement to others. We often, having gone through trials, learn ways to help other people endure them, learn ways that we can be an encouragement to others in our lives. We often in the midst of our own struggles look to others who have been through it and ask them to help us, ask them to give us insider wisdom by sharing their story. In fact, the whole of scripture is filled with story after story after story of how God has indeed provided for His people, how God has indeed led them through impossible situations, and even how He provided the lamb, for Abraham in his time of need, how He provided the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, His Son for us, so that in our sin and brokenness, in our guilt and shame, we can still trust and wait and hope in the God who sent His Son, Jesus to us.

The psalmist puts it this way in verses eight through ten, "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, He teaches the humble His ways. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness for those who keep His covenant and His testimony." And Jesus Himself, after He has been baptized and tempted in the wilderness by Satan, after He's endured that and He comes back and John the Baptist, his cousin, is killed, Jesus begins His ministry. He says these words, "The time is fulfilled; and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

I'm encouraged again by Psalm 25 because the psalmist turns to our steadfast God of love and mercy and he says in verse 7, "Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions" and instead he says, "according to Your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!"

You will be tempted. You will be tested. You will at times fall short and you will at times shine like the sun. But what I hope we don't do is to give in to discouragement. What I hope we don't do is look to ourselves either to be guided by our desires or to give up because of our failings. Instead like God's faithful people throughout the scripture, I pray that you and I daily can say, Lord, I lift up my soul. Teach me Your ways. Help me trust in You for You are the God who provided the Lamb, Jesus, so that I would be forgiven, for You are the God who loved me so much You gave Your only Son so that I might have life, even life eternal. This is the God in whom we trust and hope and wait and live. Amen.