

# Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

June 28, 2020

## Gathering

Prelude: “Amazing Grace”

Jack Schrader

Minister: To those gathered in hope, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance.  
*Jude: 1: 1-2 adapted*

Liturgist: The peace of Christ be with you.

Liturgist: And also with you.

Minister: Let us worship God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## Reconciliation

Liturgist: How long, Lord? How long, Lord?

Liturgist: Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Liturgist: Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes....  
*Psalm 13: 1-3 adapted*

### *Silent confession and lament*

Singing: 637 “Kyrie Eleison (Lord, Have Mercy)”

*Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison. Kyrie eleison.*

Liturgist: Brothers and sisters, you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
*Romans 6: 22-23 adapted*

Liturgist: Lord God, I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord’s praise for he has been good to me. *Psalm 13: 5-6*

Singing: 407 “If You But Trust in God to Guide You”

If you but trust in God to guide you and place your confidence in him, you’ll find him always there beside you to give you hope and strength within; for those who trust God’s changeless love build on the rock that will not move.

Only be still and wait his pleasure in cheerful hope with heart content. He fills your needs to fullest measure with what discerning love has sent; doubt not our inmost wants are known to him who chose us for his own.

Sing pray, and keep his ways unswerving, offer your service faithfully, and trust his word; though undeserving, you'll find his promise true to be. God never will forsake in need the soul that trusts in him indeed.

Liturgist: Our Lord Jesus said: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.  
*Matthew 22: 37-40 NRSV*

## Proclamation

Singing: 852 "Faith Begins by Letting Go"

Faith begins by letting go, giving up what had seemed sure, taking risks and pressing on, though the way feels less secure; pilgrimage both right and odd, trusting all our life to God.

Faith endures by holding on, keeping memory's roots alive so that hope may bear its fruit; promise-fed, our souls will thrive, not through merit we possess but by God's great faithfulness.

Faith matures by reaching out, stretching minds, enlarging hearts, sharing struggles, living prayer, binding up the broken parts; till we find the commonplace ripe with witness to God's grace.

Scripture: Genesis 22: 1-14

Sermon: "Living Proof"

Poem: "Abraham and Isaac" Marilyne Chandler McEntyre

He really meant to do it.  
All it took was an angel's merest touch  
to stop him, but the boy's hands  
were tied, the father's fingers  
wrapped around his jaw  
(perhaps to smother him — one paltry act  
of mercy before the fatal slice?).  
What kind of God would require  
such appalling fidelity?  
What kind of father could bear  
to imagine the blade  
leaving its trail of red  
in the tender skin of a throat  
no beard has covered?  
What would it take?  
What must be the magnitude  
of a love that would go this far?  
The look in Abraham's eye  
is crazed. The angel's message  
relieves him (though all his life  
some madness will haunt him,

and Sarah will follow his steps  
with darkened eyes).  
You don't have to do this  
any more. Another father  
will take your place  
Another son will be led to slaughter.  
The promise will be fulfilled,  
Israel's seed will be planted.  
Let him grow old and die.

Singing: 443 "My Life Flows on in Endless Song"

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation,  
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die? The Lord my savior liveth.  
What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth.

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing!  
All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?

## Dedication

Prayer

Singing: 959 "Glory Be to the Father"

Glory Be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in  
the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen.

Benediction

## Worship Leaders

Organist/Pianist/Vocalist: Dora Diephouse  
Liturgist/Vocalist/Prayer: Dave & Sally Larsen  
Liturgist/Vocalist/Flutist: Russ & Lynn Hollender  
Poetry Reading: Dan Diephouse  
Minister: Roger Nelson  
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom

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Text: Genesis 22: 1-14  
Title: Living Proof  
Date: 06.28.20  
Roger Allen Nelson

Bruce Springsteen fell in love with and married Patti Scialfa – the redheaded back-up singer in the E-Street Band. At the birth of their first child, Springsteen wrote these lyrics:

*Well now on a summer night in a dusky room come a little piece of the Lord's undying light, crying like he swallowed the fiery moon.  
In his mother's arms, it was all the beauty I could take,  
like the missing words to some prayer, well, that I could never make.  
Oh, in a world so hard and dirty, so fouled and confused,  
searching for a little bit of God's mercy, I found living proof.*

That's a beautiful image and one that you may know to be true.

In a world that can be hard and dirty, fouled and confused, there are expressions of God's mercy. I've seen it in my children and the birth of our grandson. I've seen it in your faces and in moments of hope and healing and human kindness. I've seen living proof. Maybe you have too....

We pick up our text after God picks out Abraham and Sarah and promises that he'll make of them a great nation. Except years later Sarah is still childless, so they conspire to take matters into their own hands, and Abraham sleeps with Hagar, the north-African slave girl, who gives birth to Ishmael. Eventually, God doubles down on his promise and in her late nineties or early hundreds Sarah gives birth to Isaac.

God promised and God provided.  
Isaac was living proof.  
And they laughed for joy until tears ran down their cheeks.

Only now, God is asking Abraham to revoke his proof?  
Now God is asking Abraham to kill his son – the one whom he loves?  
What kind of father would do such a thing?  
What kind of God would ask such a thing?

Let's sit with that for a moment.

Isaac was the first installment on God's promise but now the command of God was that Isaac be killed....

Biblical Hebrew has five words for sacrifice; none are used here. The word here is slaughter or slay. There is no mistaking. And, we belittle the text if we make of it a God who tests and tinkers in jest. We best take God at his word here. And it seems cruel and abusive and absurd....

John Calvin's take is that:

*The command and the promise of God are in conflict.*

Luther calls it a "contradiction."

I think one of the reasons why this story is so repugnant is that we live in a culture where happiness is the highest good.

When our daughter was getting married, and we were doing pre-wedding rigmarole, I can't tell you how many conversations included some form of, "Well, all that matters is that they're happy."

And I surely don't disagree or want anything other than their happiness, but there is no way to make sense of this story when our first priority is our children's happiness. This story must get at some other grounding, some other priority, some other truth....

Listen to the angle that Calvin carves out here. He writes that the real anguish is not the death of a son but the death of faith. In his words:

*It was sad for him to be deprived of his only son, sadder still that this son should be torn away by a violent death, and by far the most grievous that he himself should be appointed as the executioner to slay him with his own hand....*

*But all these things, if we compare them with the spiritual conflict of conscience which he endured, will appear like the mere play, or shadows of conflicts. For the great source of grief to him was not his own bereavement, not that he was commanded to slay his only heir... but that, in the person of this son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish....*

*For God...requires the death of the boy, to whose person He himself had annexed the hope of eternal salvation. So that this latter command was, in a certain sense, the destruction of faith.*

Faith over life? Come on, God.

The death of living proof?

The covenant and the command of God conflict, collide, contradict, confound.

Therefore, contemporary readings of this story often see it as the dismantling of a system of sacrifice. In the development of religion, humanity hung its hopes on idols and amulets and sacrifices (even human sacrifices) to appease the gods. A flood could wipe-out a village, a virus could kill the weak, a season of sun and gentle rain could mean prosperity. So, people developed religious practices meant to appeal to the gods behind creation's power. This story turns that practice on its head.

This God doesn't need appeasement, rather this God provides.

This God doesn't take, this God gives.

This God doesn't require sacrifice; this God calls forth faith.

Is that good enough? The whole thing is a dramatization about a new way of understanding God? That too seems to belittle or brush aside the humanity and the horror in the story.

When Abraham sees Mount Moriah in the distance he grabs a torch, a knife, and straps the wood to Isaac's shoulders. Then, just as they are about to leave, he turns to his servants and says:

*Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*

The pronouns are plural.

Either Abraham is in on the dramatization and expects to come back with Isaac or he doesn't want to blow his cover. My guess is that Abraham expects that he'll return with his son. Abraham believes that God will provide. Why would God promise one thing and then command another? Why would God revoke his living proof?

A few years ago, Ted Boswell was in a good deal of back pain, his balance and his gait were compromised, and he needed spinal chord surgery. When I saw him in recovery, he knew that the surgery had been only marginally successful and he was wondering what would come next. We talked, told stories, laughed, commiserated, and prayed. As I turned to go Ted said, "Rog, the night before surgery I read this beautiful prayer by Thomas a Kempis, from the 1400s. Six hundred years ago. Let me see if I can remember it" And, flat on his back, he said:

*O Lord, you know what is best for us, let this or that be done, as you please. Give what you will, and how much you will, and when you will. Deal with me as you think good, and as best pleases you. Set me where you will, and deal with me in all things just as you will. For, I am your servant, prepared for all things; for I desire not to live unto myself, but unto you; and oh, that I could do it worthily and perfectly! Amen.*

Ted's eyes lit up with a measure of peace. It was a deep, hard won peace, recognizing that our confidence is not in our strength, or our service, or our sacrifice, but our confidence is in God. For, come what may, God will provide.

At the end of the story Abraham names the place: *Yahweh-yireh* "The Lord provides." He doesn't name it: *Abraham-shama* "Abraham obeyed." For finally, this story is not about Abraham's faith being tested and being found faithful, but it is about God, even an inscrutable God, being found faithful.

Everything is stripped away on Mount Moriah.

There's no hope in human agency.

There's no confidence in fertility.

There's no making things right.

There's no piety that changes the deal.

There's little light or hope.

The death of Isaac nullifies the promise....

Dear friends, in this world – so hard and dirty, so foul and confused – we will all face moments when everything is stripped away.

The shadow of a knife will hang over our heads.

We will be bound up in brokenness.

We will be flat on our backs.

Our life with God may conflict and confound, but....

But the promise of God finally led God, in deep anguish of soul, to hoist the wood of sacrifice on his son's shoulders, and climb that rugged mountain....

God promised and provided.

Jesus Christ is both son and ram in the thicket.

Living proof....

Or as Springsteen writes:

*Well now all that's sure on the boulevard is that life is just a house of cards*

*As fragile as each and every breath of this boy sleeping in our bed.*

*Tonight let's lie beneath the eaves, babe, just a close band of happy thieves*

*And when that train comes we'll get on board, and steal what we can from the treasures,  
the treasures of the Lord.*

*It's been a long long drought baby, tonight the rain's pouring down on our roof,  
oh looking for a little bit of God's mercy, I found living proof.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.