

Lent 1B, 2009

Text: Genesis 22:1-18

Title: The Lord will Provide

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Anniversaries begin by looking back. That was two weeks ago as we saw how Christ has had compassion on us in this place for over 50 years through His healing touch.

Anniversaries don't stop there, of course. Anniversaries are also about the present, and what's happening here and now. That was last week, as we saw how the Spirit transforms us here and now, making us holy, like Jesus, and then using us as beacons of His light.

Anniversaries are also a time to look to the future, to look ahead. It starts with what God has done in the past, and continues with what He's doing now, but it is also a time to look forward to what He will do here for generations to come.

It's no secret that our future as a congregation is uncertain.

Membership, attendance, and giving have all been gradually declining over the past decade.

As we look around us, we miss some familiar faces. Some have been called to glory and now are part of the company of heaven. Others have been called to serve the Lord in other places, far from home. Still others have dropped away. They haven't moved, they're in good health, but they have stopped coming.

What we miss most of all are the young people, the babies, the kids, and the young adults. It's no secret. It was on my call documents. It was raised in my first meeting with the chairman of the congregation. It has been on the mind of many of you as you've talked to me, and shared your concerns about our future together. You miss having younger folks in your midst.

There are two possible ways forward. One is the way of fear- constantly worrying about what lies ahead.

The other is the way of faith- trusting in the Lord and His promises.

The way of faith is laid out for us in the Old Testament lesson, the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham is one of the great heroes of the faith and is used as an example for us throughout the Bible.

Abraham was old. His wife Sarah was old.

For many years Abraham and Sarah had been alone. They were nervous about the future. They were worried about what would happen when they died. They had no one to pass on their inheritance to. They were afraid that they would be the last in their family.

But the Lord promised to Abraham that He would make him the father of many nations. The Lord promised Abraham that his children would outnumber the sand and the stars. From this one elderly couple would come the largest family on earth. And the Lord promised Abraham that all nations of the world would be blessed through him.

It seemed foolish. It seemed impossible. Abraham and Sarah were as good as dead. You remember what Sarah did when she heard that she would become a mother in her old age? She laughed out loud. It was ridiculous.

But the Lord is always full of surprises. The Lord performed a miracle. He opened Sarah's womb and made her a mother, even at 90 years old. The Lord kept His promise and provided a son for Abraham and Sarah. .

This son was Isaac. All of sudden Abraham and Sarah had hope. They had joy. The future of their family was no longer uncertain.

But today, in our Old Testament lesson, things are different. The Lord asks Abraham to do the unthinkable and give up his son.

We know that the Lord was testing Abraham's faith. We know how the story ends. We know that Isaac's life was spared, and that the Lord provided a substitute.

But Abraham didn't know this. He thought that he would have to kill his son. The Lord's plan didn't make sense. Now all of sudden things were back to being uncertain. If Isaac was gone, what would happen to Abraham's family?

But Abraham still acted out of faith. He obeyed the Lord, even when he didn't understand what the Lord was up to.

The book of Hebrews tells us more about what was going on here.

“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,¹⁸ even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring^[b] will be reckoned.”^[c]¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”

Abraham trusted in the Lord's promise to him. He knew that even if Isaac died, that would not be the end. The words and promises of God hold stronger than death and the grave.

The Lord provided for Abraham. He provided him with a son. And then, the Lord provided a substitute to die in the place of his son. After Isaac would come Jacob and his twelve sons. The promise extended through them all the way to Jesus, the son of Abraham whose death brings blessing to all nations.

The Lord provided for Abraham and the Lord has provided for us as well.

Most importantly, He has provided us with a substitute, a Savior, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He spared Isaac and all of us as well. We deserve death for our sins. But the Lord has provided a substitute. He allowed His own Son to die so that we might have life.

And He has provided for us a place, right here to receive all the gifts that Jesus won for us on the cross.

The Lord has provided you with a beautiful building, a place to gather together week after week.

The Lord has provided you with people- pastors and teachers, musicians and artists, volunteers of all ages to keep this congregation going, so that the blessings of the Lord might flow from generation to generation.

The Lord has provided you with His words of blessing and forgiveness, written in Scripture, proclaimed in the liturgy.

The Lord has provided you with His body and His blood in the Lord's Supper, flowing from the cross to this place, to this altar, to your very lips this morning.

The Lord has provided you with fellow members of this congregation- people to care for you in the tough times, people to rejoice with you in the happy times.

The Lord has certainly provided for this congregation in years past. Everything we have is a gift from the Lord.

The Lord has promised to provide for His people for generations to come. He has promised that His church will endure until He returns.

But the Lord hasn't given us any specifics. He hasn't laid out all the details of His plan. Sometimes, as with Abraham, His ways are strange and confusing to us. We wonder why the Lord does things the way that He does.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a time of testing for our congregation. We cannot rely on our own strength and resources. We are a small family. We are getting older. If we try to make it on our own, we will fail.

There may come a time when this congregation shuts its doors. There may come a time when all of us have passed on or moved away, and no one has come to replace us. Many of you have seen this happen to other churches in the area- Hope, St. Martini, and others.

We pray that day doesn't come for us, but it's in the Lord's hands. Like Abraham, we trust in the Lord, even when the situation seems dire and hopeless. We have a God who can raise the dead.

And so it doesn't do us any good to worry or live in fear.

As we face the future, we live in faith and trust, and obey the Lord's words. The Lord is the one who adds to our numbers. The Lord is the one who has brought each of us here. The Lord has made us His people through baptism. The Lord is the one who creates faith in our hearts to trust in Him.

Every person here is a miracle. Every one of you is an Isaac, a wonderful surprise.

On our own, we can't add a single person to this congregation. It's all the Lord's doing.

But the Lord uses us to do this. The Lord used Abraham, even when he thought he was too old. If the Lord is going to add people to this congregation, he is going to use you to do it. It may be your family members. It may be your friends. It may be your coworkers.

When the founders of this congregation chose a name, they chose "Faith." This is Faith Lutheran Church. This is not "Fear" Lutheran Church. This is not "worry" Lutheran Church. This is not Doubt Lutheran Church.

This is "Faith" Lutheran Church. Our faith is a gift from the Lord. He gave faith to Abraham. He gave faith to those who founded this congregation and who built this sanctuary. He has given faith to us, too.

With the faith we the Lord has given us, we face our future and the days ahead. The Lord will provide for us. He has done so in the past, He is doing so right now, and He will do so in the future, from generation to generation.