

“The Lord Taketh Away?”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
July 2, 2023 - Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 8

[Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42](#)

“The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.” Or so it has been said many times over the millennia since words similar to these appeared in the biblical story of Job. We remember the story of Job and how through his many gains and then many losses, he felt that it was God who both gave and took away. And perhaps during the course of your own life, with its ups and downs, times of sickness and times of health, times of plenty and times of want, you’ve felt the same, that both the giving and taking was God’s doing.

I wonder if this thought was on Abraham’s mind when God gave him the deeply disturbing command to take his child up to a mountaintop to offer him as a sacrifice to God, as we heard in today’s first scripture lesson from Genesis. Or perhaps maybe he remembered how his amazing journey with God that led him to that moment taught him that while God was indeed the one who giveth, God was not one who taketh away. He would have learned this as he followed the hard command of God, who called him away from his family and their many gods in Mesopotamia and to head west to another place where God would have him settle and worship God alone, that in leaving his kin and their ways, he would find greater blessing elsewhere. He would have learned, as we heard in our reading from a couple of weeks ago, that after offering an extravagant welcome to three visiting strangers, who were actually God and a pair of angels, by offering them a lavish feast before they went on their way, God responded to the grace of Abraham and Sarah by offering to them a much more lavish gift, promising them that, even at their ripe old age of 100, they would have a child. Sarah laughed at this news, but sure enough, God was faithful in keeping this promise, and Sarah the laughing Golden Ager gave birth to a son, Isaac. We heard in last Sunday’s lesson from Genesis that when Sarah desired to have Abraham’s other child and his mother, who were enslaved by Sarah and Abraham, cast away alone into the desert, that God promised to Abraham that they would not perish, but that God would take care of them and that from them would rise a whole nation of people. And so, trusting in this promise, Abraham sent them away. Perhaps stories about

how the child and his mother thrived in the desert as God provided for them came back to Abraham, and he learned yet again that he could trust in the promise of God that God will provide.

So when God called Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, this child that God had promised to Sarah, the child that God told them would grow and have descendants of his own that would bless the whole world, perhaps Abraham recognized that the God who called him, who blessed him, who enabled aged Sarah to give birth to Isaac, and who faithfully cared for his other child and her mother according to a promise, would once again give life and not take it away. Perhaps this was on Abraham's mind when he said to Isaac, even while leading him to the mountaintop, that God would provide the lamb. We don't know what Abraham was thinking in that moment, but acting in faith in the One who had already faithfully given him and those he loved so much life, he did as God commanded. And so God, seeing Abraham's trust, commanded for him to stop and to look and see that God indeed provided for him a ram for sacrifice. Once again, God proved to be a giver and not a taker.

This is a very difficult passage, and much ink has been spilled over the years as people have considered and opined about its meaning, including Protestant heroes Martin Luther and John Calvin, who both wrote of the contradictions provided in the story, of God being both the One who seeks to take and the One who provides, with Calvin stating that "The command and promise of God are in conflict," and Luther writing that the story provides a "contradiction with which God contradicts himself." But perhaps the command and promise do not totally conflict or offer a contradiction. Perhaps instead the difficult command offered Abraham an opportunity not only to prove his faithfulness, but to witness and experience God proving God's faithfulness, that no matter what, even in the very worst of moments, God would be faithful to the promise God had made.

Sometimes, we only learn this lesson through finding God's grace carrying us through the bleakest moments of our lives, when all seems lost, when we feel completely abandoned, or when we sense God calling us to do what seems completely impossible. My own belief is that God does not take away our health or happiness, rob us of our loved ones, or ask us to do what cannot be done; I believe, rather, that God works through all our difficulties and losses, especially

when we experience them because of our faithfulness to God, to show us that God is perfect in faithfulness and that God will always provide what we need to carry on.

May we all see God's grace in this moment, whatever we are experiencing in our lives. May we help each other on life's journey, being the willing and faithful agents of God's provision for one another. May God bless each of us and our household of faith as we faithfully serve one another and the world. Amen.