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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Judica (Fifth Sunday in Lent)

March 21, 2021

Text: Genesis 22:1–14

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The history of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac is one of the most joyful and troubling portions of the Bible. The Lord God called Abram, so he was called at first, to leave behind everything he knew in his own country, his family and society, and his false gods. The Lord gave a wonderful promise to Abram as he was leaving Haran, “I will make of you a great nation...and in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed: (Gen. 12:1–3). The Lord led him to the land of Canaan, down to Egypt, and then back to Canaan. Lot, Abraham’s nephew, and his family joined Abraham and Sarah. At least a couple of decades went by and Abraham and Sarah were still childless. How was the Lord to raise up a great nation from Abraham’s lineage if they didn’t have any children? There are a number of twists and turns to this story, but the Lord eventually visits Abraham and Sarah through an angel announcing that Sarah will give birth to son in nine months. Both Abraham and Sarah laugh when they heard the promise of that Sarah would give birth to a son. She was 90 years old and Abraham 100!

In the due course of time, it became obvious that Sarah was pregnant and eventually gave birth to a son whom they named Isaac. His name means “he laughs”, a fitting name to be sure. The Bible calls Isaac, the son of promise. Even as all true, Christian believers are likewise called “children of promise” (Galatians 4:23, 28). Isaac’s birth was a miracle in the truest sense of the world; 90-year-old women don’t get pregnant. Our new birth into Christ Jesus through the gospel is likewise a miracle of God’s grace and love. We humans being who are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins awaiting a physical death don’t suddenly become spiritually alive. Every Christian is a miracle. Christians aren’t made through being born in a predominantly Christian land to Christian parents, though those are wonderful gifts of our heavenly Father. No, Christians are supernaturally born by the ministry of the Holy Spirit working through Christ’s Gospel. We are all Isaacs. Children of promise. Children of joy. Does not Jesus say in Luke 15 that the angels rejoice in heaven over sinners who repent and believe in Jesus?!

All of this wonderful, joyful history. But now the troubling side of Abraham and Isaac's history. Today's OT reading records Abraham's trial of faith. The Lord God called out to Abraham, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (vs. 2). Can you feel the power behind those words, "your only son...whom you love"? Isaac was the son of promise and laughter. Now the son of anguish and trial. Not because of anything Isaac did. But because of God Himself? And this is the real difficulty. In one sense, God has become Abraham's enemy. He, that is God, is taking away the very son of promise, the Son whom God gave miraculously through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

It's arguable that the test of Abraham and the trial of the Syrophenician woman in the NT gospels (Matthew 15, Mark 7) are the most difficult in all of Scripture. The reason I say this is that in both cases, the adversary is God Himself. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. The Lord Jesus was silent and dismissive of the Syrophenician woman's request to heal her daughter of demon oppression. And yet, and here is where we must set our eyes of faith, God proves Himself to be true and faithful under the very appearance of hostility and adversity. God remains true.

We Christians, especially living in the wealth and prosperity of 21<sup>st</sup> century America, need to be reminded that God's good and gracious will is often experienced with difficult and many, many bitter trials. Trials that God Himself brings upon us. Abraham didn't ask for this test. The Syrophenician woman sought God's grace in Christ not His severity. But the Biblical saints knew God's grace often came under the form of trial, judgment, and suffering. Listen to these Bible passages which illustrate that God works through both judgment and grace in our lives.

Deuteronomy 32:39

<sup>39</sup>“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

Hosea 6:1

<sup>1</sup>“Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.

Psalms 60:1–5

<sup>1</sup>O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; oh, restore us. <sup>2</sup>You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open; repair its

breaches, for it totters. <sup>3</sup>You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger. <sup>4</sup>You have set up a banner for those who fear you, that they may flee to it from the bow. <sup>5</sup>That your beloved ones may be delivered, give salvation by your right hand and answer us!

I share the Biblical witness that we may know better how God works in and through trial and testing, breaking and healing, even death and resurrection to prove us and refine us. I am not suggesting that we seek out trials and testing. God Himself works this in our lives when and where He wills. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." The Bible reminds us that God accomplishes His will for the salvation of His people and the glory of His name. At times, His will is joyous and easy. Other times, it is hard. St. Augustine described God's work in his life as a "severe mercy."

God does this work in our lives to bring us closer to Himself. The apostle Paul wrote how God used the adversities of his life to bring him into a greater and more joyous knowledge of Christ Jesus. At one point in his missionary work, Paul had been arrested unjustly for preaching about Jesus. He had broken no law. But he suffered nonetheless for his faith and faithfulness to Jesus. Listen to these words which he wrote to the Philippian Christians while in jail (Philippians 3:7–11):

<sup>7</sup>But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup>and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— <sup>10</sup>that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup>that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul shared in Christ's sufferings so that He could also participate in Christ's resurrection. The Holy Spirit gave these saints the faith to trust and believe in God even when it meant bitter suffering. Throughout Lent, we sing as a prayer the hymn "On My Heart Imprint Your Image". We mustn't forget it's the image of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. Even when it looks like God has abandoned us, He is, in fact, upholding us with His love, drawing ever closer to Himself.

Abraham went to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But at the fateful moment, the Lord stayed Abraham's hand, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to

him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen. 22:12). God provided a sacrifice that day, a ram caught in a thicket. Isaac would not die but live. And through Isaac and his posterity, the Lord Jesus Christ would be born, the Savior of the world.

And it’s here that we must recall the singular event that gives meaning to all suffering, to all of God’s works and ways in the world. It’s the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Isaac was the son of promise, the only son, the beloved son. Those descriptions ought to perk our Christian ears. What Isaac was in prophetic foreshadowing, the Lord Jesus fulfills in redemptive substance. For Jesus is the Son of promise; beginning at Genesis 3:15, God the Father promised that the divine seed of the woman would crush the devil’s head and undo all his evil. Jesus is the only Son of God the Father, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. In the perfection of the Divine Trinity, the Father and the Son knew and loved each other through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the beloved, only begotten Son of promise. The Father’s love for His Son was and is infinitely more powerful and full than our love for our husbands and wives and children.

And yet, the Father gave His one and only begotten Son, whom He loved in perfection, over to suffering and death that the world might be redeemed. The Lord gave Abraham a ram in the thicket to save Isaac from death. There would be no substitutionary sacrifice to save Jesus from death. He Himself is the sacrifice, given by the Father in love to save Abraham, the Canaanite woman, you, me and all believers in Christ; His death was our death, His suffering our suffering, His resurrection from the dead our resurrection. Hebrews 9:14 reminds us that Jesus offered His own blood to His heavenly Father through the eternal Spirit in order to “purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” God purifies our conscience through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It’s not always easy. But it is always good. God the Father brings us through the trials and joys of life in this world. The adversities we face in this world are preparing us for greater and deeper joy in this world and the world to come. For now in Christ, we are His beloved children; His children of joy and promise.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.