

Lent 1 / February 18, 2024

Genesis 22:8

“God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.”

On the Mount of the Lord sacrifice will be provided

The scriptures the first Sunday of Lent have a theme of testing and temptation. God tests Abraham to know whom he loves more, Him or the son He gave him. God didn't do this for His benefit. He did it for Abraham's benefit, so that having passed the test, his faith would be more firmly established. God did it for our benefit, so we would follow the example of Abraham's faith and believe His promise to provide. God tests us so we learn by experience that His grace is sufficient to meet our needs. In the gospel, Jesus is forty days in the wilderness, tempted by Satan. He was tested and overcame temptation, not for His own sake, but for our sake. First, so He might offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice to atone for the sin of the world. Second, so that when we are tempted and tested, we would draw near to Him to receive mercy and find grace to help in all our needs.

In the New Testament lesson, St. James speaks about temptation to sin. He says God tempts no one to sin. God tested Abraham in order to affirm his faith. Satan tempted Jesus to sin. Temptation to sin against God's commandments comes from the devil, the world and our own sinful nature. James writes specifically about our sinful nature, saying each person is tempted, “when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” Testing and temptation are similar in a certain sense, but different in their intent. The purpose of testing is a demonstration of faith. The purpose of temptation is sin. God tested Abraham to demonstrate his faith, so we would see how highly God values it. Without faith it is impossible to please God. God tested Abraham so he and we, would believe His greatest promise, to provide a sacrifice by which the debt of our sin would be paid. God provided Jesus for our forgiveness. We have peace with God through faith in Him.

Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn't name the temptations. The fact that it was the devil makes the temptations bad. On the surface it seems that the Lord asked Abraham to do something bad, saying “Take your son...Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering.” What a ghastly thing to ask someone to do! Yet Abraham didn't act as if it was a ghastly request. Isaac wonders where the sacrifice is, but even he doesn't protest when the sacrifice turns out to be him. That's because, in the culture of the ancient near east it would have been seen as quite reasonable for a deity to make such a request of a devotee. The person sacrificed may well have considered it an honour to be chosen as the perfect victim. People in the ancient world didn't think about these things the way we think about them now.

Human sacrifice was a common practice in the ancient near east, in the land of Canaan where Abraham lived and throughout the earth. The more precious the offering the more effective the sacrifice was thought to be. It was however a ghastly request. It was ghastly, because there was nothing the Lord hated more than human and especially child sacrifice. It was because of these things that the Lord was evicting the Canaanites from the land and giving it to Abraham's offspring, Israel. The Lord was testing Abraham's devotion, not commending human sacrifice. In stopping Abraham and providing a substitute, the Lord was condemning human sacrifice, showing it must stop and never be practiced by Israel. The Lord provided: First a ram for Isaac. Finally, and most importantly, His own Son as the final sacrifice, the true sacrifice by which human sin was atoned, fully and forever.

God tested Abraham to make a point and a promise. His point was that human sacrifice is evil and should be forever banned. God hated nothing more than the sacrifice of humans, adults or children. It was because the inhabitants of the land of Canaan did these things that the Lord was casting them out. Centuries later when Israel prepared to enter the Promised Land, the Lord said if they did those things they too would be cast out. Sadly, they often followed in the sin of the Canaanites rather than the faith of Abraham. In Jeremiah 19 the Lord lamented the sin of His people, saying, “The people have forsaken me and profaned this place by making offerings to other gods...they have filled this place with the blood of innocents and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind.” Abraham's faith was that God would provide the sacrifice. God provided a ram for Isaac. He provided His only Son for us all. He bore our sin on the cross. He atoned for our guilt through His blood. God provided the perfect sacrifice in His Son Jesus Christ.

God made the sacrifice of animals and humans obsolete, by sending His Son to offer the sacrifice that truly took away the sin of the world. His sacrifice reconciled humans to Him in peace. People sacrificed, because they felt it necessary to propitiate the wrath of the gods. In times of extreme emergency, the most precious sacrifice was necessary. Nothing is more precious than human life. No human life more precious than a child's life. People might ask, 'if human sacrifice is evil and should be forever banned, how could God sacrifice His Son?' 'Isn't it the same?' It's not the same, because the Father and the Son are one God in unity with the Spirit. In giving His Son as the sacrificial victim, God was giving Himself for our sin. In the person of Christ, God sacrificed Himself for human sin, so that in Him we would be reconciled to Him and have the peace of forgiveness.

Since time immemorial, people all over the world have felt the need to sacrifice for sin. The need to sacrifice is an expression of the human sense of sin and guilt in relation to God. Missionaries who make first contact with undiscovered tribes, don't have to convince them about God and sin. They believe in God, have a sense of sin and a means of dealing with its guilt. We sense our sin. We assume we are the ones responsible for fixing the problem. Human religions always reach up to God in laws, obedience, good works and humans sacrifices. We caused the problem, but that doesn't mean we can fix it. God reached down to Abraham and provided the sacrifice. In Christ, God reached out with the perfect sacrifice that fixed the problem of sin. In Christ, He reaches out to us with forgiveness and peace.

We get ourselves into lots of situations that we can't get out of and need someone else to rescue us from. Sin and death are our greatest problems. In Psalm 49 the Psalmist sang, "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice that he should live on forever and never see death." We owe a debt of sin that we cannot pay. In terms of human relationships, there are some offenses for which we can make atonement. We can pay a fine, a ransom, a debt to make things up between us and another person. However, only God could mend our relationship with Him, broken by human sin. In calling Abraham to sacrifice his son and then telling him to stop, God was telling humans to stop trying to sacrifice to bring ourselves into a good relationship with Him. In providing the sacrifice in place of Isaac, God was showing that He Himself would provide the sacrifice that makes peace between us and Himself, atones for sin and brings us into a good relationship with Him. God provided that sacrifice in Christ, the Lamb who was slain to atone for the sin of the world.

God provides all that is necessary for life in this world. The earth is just the right distance from its sun. Its axis tilted at just the right angle. It rotates at just the right speed, so the days are not too long or too short. Although it does seem to spin a little faster the older you get. God sustains our lives through the bounty of the earth, this oasis in the universe. We don't have to do a thing, God provides. Even as God provides for our physical needs in time, so He provided for our spiritual needs in time and for eternity, by giving Jesus to bear our sin and be our Saviour. On the mount of His crucifixion, God provided the sacrifice of forgiveness that gives us life with Him in time and for eternity.

God continue to provide us with His Holy Spirit that our hearts may receive the salvation he provides for every human soul through the sacrifice of Christ our Saviour. In Jesus' Name. Amen