

Behold the Lamb of God

Part 3: God Will Provide a Lamb

TEXT: GENESIS 22:1-14 (ESV)



(About the Art: by Abby Mangan, commissioned for Oak Hills Presbyterian Church's 2009 Christmas Celebration™)

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An Old Tale

Today we venture deeper into the story of Genesis, the first book of the Bible and the first place we find not only man's need for our Savior Jesus Christ, but also the promise of His coming. The Old Testament is not a record of isolated events from before Jesus was born. It is the story of everything leading up to His birth. Genesis gives us the beginning of the greatest story ever told—the rescue of man from his sin and separation from God. Last week we moved from the story of the Creation

and fall of man to God's calling Abraham to become a great nation—God's own people—promising his descendants would not only outnumber the stars of heaven, but also that from his line all the earth would be blessed. But how could this be since Abraham had no sons. Today we see God's answer in a story that is one of the greatest foreshadowings of Jesus in Scripture.

Genesis 22:1-14

¹God tested Abraham and said, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." ²He said, "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." ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

⁴On the 3rd day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and return to you." ⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.

⁷And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

⁹When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" He said, "Here am I." ¹²He said, "Don't lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. Abraham took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

The Barren Beauty Laughs

Sarah sat in her tent grinding grain into flour to make the meal her husband requested for the visitors who appeared. They were angelic, more alien to this land than Abraham himself. He recognized the Lord was among them. In a rush to hospitality, Abraham gave Sarah a list of preparations. Though she was nearly 90 years old, she got to work. This guest of theirs—the Lord Himself—was the reason they were there in that foreign land in the first place. Her memories of this were long.

She thought of when she was beautiful and young. Even at 65, her beauty was so compelling that Abram thought it best if he lied and told people she was his sister. Sarai, as she was known back then, remembered the swell of pride that came over her during the great famine when they had to go to Egypt for food. Her dear husband asked her to pretend to be his sister so the Pharaoh wouldn't kill him just to have her. ^(Gen 12:11-20) It wasn't safe. She was too beautiful, he told her. What could she say? She agreed even if it meant she'd have to deal with suitors again.

Better dishonored than dead, they'd say. The irony here wasn't lost on Sarai. She had a secret. In the eyes of men, she was alive with beauty. But in a place where she would have given anything to sow the seeds of life, she was dead. Her womb was barren and she was desperate for children. She'd been raised to know it was her honor and purpose to give her husband an heir.

But she couldn't. For thirty years she'd lived the life of a nomad because her husband believed the Lord was going to give them a son and through him all the earth would be blessed. But there was nothing she could do about it. This would require a miracle birth. For her to give Abraham a son, her womb had to be resurrected to life. That sort of thing simply didn't happen.

As she kneaded the dough, her mind drifted again. She thought of Hagar. Oh, how she couldn't bear the sight of that woman and her boy Ishmael. A surge of remorse and anger came over her. Ishmael was, after all, her idea. She knew her barrenness wasn't her burden alone. Her husband bore it too. So with all this talk of an heir and with her inability to deliver one, she wondered. What about her maidservant? Hagar wasn't barren.

Sarai went to her husband and said, "The Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." ^(Gen 16:2) In what seemed like far too little time, Abram agreed to this and Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael. Sarai's words had become flesh which now dwelt with her. She got what she wanted, and she hated what she got. ^(Gen 16:3-6)

But this was not God's plan. Just months ago the Lord had appeared to Abram again. Once again, their meeting had to do with this promise of an heir. The Lord gave Abram the sign of circumcision so he might remember God's intent. This sign was to be applied to the source of Abram's seed, and to every other man in his household, signifying that they had been cut off from the land they had come from. They were now irreversibly separated and consecrated unto God in a lasting way. ^(Gen 17:1-14)

The son of that covenant would indeed come from Abram through Sarai. So specific was this point that during the institution of circumcision, God changed Abram's name to Abraham, "the Father of Nations." But that wasn't all. God also changed Sarai's name to Sarah, which meant "Princess." She'd be the one to carry the line of blessing, barren and old though she was. God renamed these two not according to what they were, but according to who He would make of them. ^(Gen 17:4-6, 15-16)

Sarah heard the visitor ask, "Where is your wife?" "There, in the tent," Abraham replied. Then the Lord said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son." ^(Gen 18:9-10) When she heard this, well, Sarah laughed. It wasn't that her childbearing years were behind her. They never happened. This shell of a woman with this wisp of a husband were now going to succeed at what they'd failed at for over 50 years?

The Lord heard her laugh. He asked Abraham, "Why did she laugh?" Sarah lied, "I did not laugh." But the Lord said, "Yes you did." He knew she did. And why. It wasn't deliberate—it was half laugh, half exhale. Why would God rebuke her for this? The Lord knew her situation—her barren beauty, her surrogate son. Her laugh was the laugh of turning away. She'd reached her end.

But His rebuke, like two hands on her shoulders, turned her back to face Him. The Lord wouldn't permit Sarah to divide her heart from Him. ^(Rom 8:38-39) This princess would be a queen, no matter what she felt or thought. The One who read her mind could open her womb. He knew better than she how incredible His promise was. In one year, Sarah would have a son. One year later, Sarah laughed again. It was 3:30am when she crawled out of bed for the second time that night to feed her hungry, crying, rosy-cheeked baby boy. She looked up at the stars lighting the clear desert sky and she began to count. One.

God Will Provide a Lamb

She named the boy Laughter, or Isaac, saying, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." ^(Gen 21:6-7) God told them, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ^(Gen 21:12) It was a season of unspeakable joy. They were living among the Philistines ^(Gen 21:34) as Isaac grew strong and healthy. Though still their little boy, when the light was right Sarah could see the face of a man below the surface of his smooth skin. They loved him. So when Abraham told her about his most recent visit from the Lord, the look of vacant grief in his eyes told her that whatever they'd discussed, it involved her beloved Laughter, and it wasn't good news. God wanted what?!

Abraham had servants to tend his livery, so he never tacked his own mount. But on this morning Abraham saddled his donkey alone. This mission was uniquely his own. Though two servants would join him, no one would share the lonely, holy quest burdening this aging father's heart. He gathered clothes, food and water. He cut and bundled wood for the sacrifice. And then he went to where he kept his knives. He studied them—their length, the truth of their edge. As he chose one, it felt hot with purpose in his hand. It was heavier than he remembered.

The journey took 3 days. With two servants and his inquisitive boy, Abraham led the way to a hill outside what would later become Jerusalem to offer up his son, his only son. ^(Gen 22:2) Born of divine intervention, wasn't this the boy through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed? The one who would fulfill the Covenant God had cut with Abraham? Had God really sent this child into the world to die as a sacrifice on a hill in the middle of the Promised Land, in effect killing the promise itself?

If he was to die, Abraham believed God would raise him from the dead. ^(Heb 11:19) Still, for three days with the hill drawing ever closer, Abraham believed he'd have to experience the sensation of plunging the knife he chose into the heart of his own son for God. No amount of belief in the resurrection could ease this.

At the foot of the mount, Isaac takes a quick inventory and asks, "I see the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" His father answers, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." ^(Gen 22:7-8) The father and his only son ascend the mount alone. At the summit, Abraham builds an altar, arranging the wood as Isaac watches. Then he turns to his son to explain what needs to happen next. With Laughter's compliance, Abraham binds him and lays him on the altar. He raises the knife. He looks to heaven and then at his fearful son.

His muscles go tight as he lucidly realizes that he is actually about to do the unthinkable. He has it in him. He will do this. But just as the blade is about to plunge into that beloved flesh of his own flesh, the angel of the Lord appears, crying out; "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy." ^(Gen 22:11-12) No knife has fallen to the ground faster in all of human history.

Abraham looked up and couldn't believe what he saw. How had he not noticed it before? He knew perfectly well how. Still, there incarnate before him caught by its horns in the nearby thicket stood a ram, as if it was sent to this hill for the purpose of dying in order that Isaac might live. "Abraham took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son." ^(Gen 22:13)

The angel of the Lord appeared again with a word from God; "Because you've done this and have not withheld your only son, I will surely bless you and multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven... And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." ^(Gen 22:16-18) This message wasn't new, and that as much as anything made it like a sweet song in Abraham's ears. It was the same oath God swore at the beginning. ^(Gen 12:1-3)

Walking down the mountain with his son beside him, the old man looked back over his shoulder. This place needed a name. He called it, "The Lord will Provide." ^(Gen 22:14) "Indeed," he thought as he pulled Laughter close and they headed home to Sarah.

God Has Provided a Lamb

Beloved, this is not the story of what almost happened but didn't. This is the story of what was coming. On a hill outside Jerusalem, a Father would offer up His only Son as a sacrifice. Only there'd be no stopping this one, no ram in a thicket to serve as a substitute. This Son was the substitute, dying in the place sinners, taking upon Himself God's wrath toward our sins.

Christmas is a celebration of the purpose and faithfulness of God to call a remnant of people to Himself from the unbroken line of our first parents. As the angel told Joseph, "call Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." ^(Matt 1:21) Jesus was born into this world to completely and perfectly fulfill the covenant promise of God. And this is just what He did. May your celebration of Christmas be marked by your worship of Jesus.