

The Agony of Life and Faith

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Psalm 13; Genesis 22:1-14
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Today we are beginning our summer sermon series, which is entitled "The Book of Genesis: Surprises and Disruptions with the Family of Faith." Over the course of the coming weeks, into the beginning of September, we'll be reflecting on the juicy, difficult, strange, and wonderful stories of the book of Genesis, situating ourselves in them, bringing our contemporary experiences, questions, and difficulties to them, letting these ancient stories shape our sense of ourselves, our world, and God.

The title of the series puts us on alert to expect surprises and disruptions. This works in a couple of different directions, either of which may be a little unsettling. What many of us might want right now is for things to get back to normal. We want things back the way they were. This kind of feeling may strike us with the disruptions of the novel coronavirus, but it can also rise up with a nostalgia for some earlier time when things seemed more settled. This is one of the lures of high school reunions, where we can remember the good ol' days. But when we go back for the reunion, sometimes things don't seem quite as shiny as we thought they were. We may also find ourselves remembering some of the awkwardness of those high school years. And we may come to learn that those years were very painful for some people. And in any event, one of the features of time is that you can't go back. Disruptions are part of our lives.

What we find when we open the pages of the Bible is that disruptions are also characteristic of biblical faith. God's acts of creation, redemption, resurrection – all of these are disruptive in their own way. In the coming weeks, we'll be spending time with the family of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Esau and Jacob and Leah and Rachel and Joseph and his brothers. What we will find is that this family, our ancestral family of faith, as the saying goes, puts the word 'fun' in dysfunctional. There is a lot of drama in this family of faith, as there is a lot of drama in all of our families, including our family as a congregation, a society, and a world. There is drama, there is betrayal, there is cruelty and selfishness and greed...

...and there is the sovereign, providential grace of God.

That may be the biggest surprise of all. Somehow, in some mysterious way, God uses this first family, this difficult, turbulent first family to bring blessing to the world. Genesis 12 is where this family's story begins, where God says to Abraham, "Go from your country, leave your comfort zone, and go to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and you will be a blessing to others." That

promise governs the entire narrative to follow. God will give a land, God will make a nation, God will bring blessing. This is essentially the same promise as in Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm;" it is essentially the same promise in Romans 8:28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who God, who are called according to his purpose." God promises blessing, well-being, and saving presence.

The promises of blessing, security, and shalom are the promises that animate the dreams that inspire us the most. They animate the promise of the beloved community, where the small, vulnerable lambs share food and space with the powerful, aggressive lions. They animate the dreams we have of a meaningful career, or a healthy relationship. They undergird our hopes for church renewal and growth in congregational mission. They are inside of the promise of racial justice, where skin color does not guide outcomes in education, or health care, or economics, or safety. They inspire our mission work, like the work of the Summer Mission Project, as well as our work for peace and reconciliation, work that can take place between enemies who have mistrusted each other for so very long.

All of those kinds of dreams and hopes are represented in the promise of Genesis 12. "I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing to others." But these stories are not naïve. One of the surprises of these stories is that they know that growth and healing and development and progress do not take place in a straight line. There are steps forward towards the promise, and then there are steps back.

Within this particular story, the promise to Abraham of the land and the blessing and the nation depends on Abraham's having an heir. But one important detail is that Abraham is 75 when the story starts, and 11 years later, when he is 86, he and his wife Sarah still have no children. Trying to figure out how this is going to work, Abraham and Sarah decide that they need to take matters into their own hands, and Abraham has a child with Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar. That child's name is Ishmael, and is another sermon series altogether. But God tells Abraham that wasn't what God had in mind. So another 14 years go by – which makes it a full quarter century since Abraham had the initial vision – and when Abraham is 100, he and Sarah give birth to little Isaac, whose name means 'laughter,' because the idea, even in biblical times, for a 100 year old man and a 90 year old woman to have a child would have been seen as hilarious. The surprises keep coming.

But then, immediately after Isaac's birth in chapter 21, we come to our text for today, which Linda courageously read for us, in chapter 22. If you ask me, Genesis 22 is one of the darkest, most hauntingly awful texts in the Bible. I do not know anyone who says that Genesis 22 is one of their top 10 favorite biblical passages. God *tests* Abraham, the text says in verse 1, by commanding him to take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering.

There really is no easy way around this story. Some say that this story is just a way to explain the end of human sacrifice, but that is way too thin a way to read this story. Even if we say that God knew in verse 1 that God was just testing, that God was not going to go through with the sacrifice of Isaac, *Abraham* does not know that. And this does not even get to the fact that Sarah is given no voice in this matter about her son.

And in terms of the larger narrative, this story dares to assert that God throws up a massive obstacle in the fulfillment of God's own vision. For the future of God's promise in Genesis 12 – the land, the blessing, the nation – all will be carried through Isaac. And now God is directing Abraham to put an end to Isaac, which would put an end to the promise. Have you ever held a promise that suddenly seemed to have reached a dead end?

We should not reach too quickly for rationalizations and justifications that explain away the difficulty of this story. It is better, I think, for us to allow the story to reflect the reality of how very difficult life can be. How life can take a sudden turn on you, and all of your greatest hopes and dreams and visions are suddenly put at risk. You can deeply believe that you have a clear sense of what needs to happen, what the righteous, good, beautiful path to follow is, and then a curveball comes in at you and turns the whole thing upside down.

And what this story dares to contemplate is that sometimes those curveballs are thrown by God. Most of us do not like to think this way, we prefer to think that God would never forget us, would never hide God's face from us, is immutable, unchanging, and never disrupting. But biblical faith dares to imagine that God is a live character in the world and in our lives, with whom we are in a living, thick relationship in which we are invited, not only to thanks and praise, but also to argument and complaint, as in Psalm 13, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?"...

Right in the middle of our story, right in the middle of his agony over what is going on, right in the middle of feeling like things are not unfolding the way he would want them to, Abraham answers Isaac's question about where the lamb is for the offering by saying, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering." We cannot know exactly what Abraham had in mind with these words. We don't know whether he said them with confidence, or whether the words caught in his throat as he walked with his son. We may imagine that he said them in a deliberately open-ended fashion because he didn't want to say more than he could. But Abraham walked forward into his agony, not knowing exactly what would come, but placing himself in the providence of God, who had been reliable in the past. The providence of God is a trust that God will provide. We do not know *what* God will provide. We do not know *when* God will provide.

We do not know *how* God will accomplish God's purposes of shalom and blessing and racial justice and reconciliation between enemies. But we believe that the providence of God will ultimately provide for God's purposes to be accomplished. And we can be sure that it will involve *us*, that God will use *us* – all of us, with our talents and with our failures, with our most courageous efforts and with our most fearful hesitations. God will use it all, to bring about the blessing and the future that God dreams of. And we can be sure that it will involve surprises and disruptions. To God be all the glory, Amen.