

Lord, make these words to be your Word, that our hearts might become your Heart.

What was I thinking??? There's a reason no one preaches on this story.
I like a challenge; I love to find the good news in the grimmest of bible stories.
But this? A father told to offer his son as a blood sacrifice?

This story surely doesn't depict God in a light we find acceptable.

I'm not sure how it came to be told, and recorded, and kept in the canon –

there are as many interpretations of this hard story as there are scholars.

Some say it was a story told to end the practice of child sacrifice;

some say it was told to show that the primacy of Isaac over Ishmael,

some that it's about absolute trust and obedience.

But still, our scriptures contain a story in which God tells a father to offer his son,
the son promised him decades earlier, born when he and his barren wife were
already aged... that son? What kind of mind trick is this? What kind of God?

Well, there are a lot of stories like that in the Hebrew Bible, a lot of tales that don't
accord with our moral values, or the view we've been taught of who God is.

I've come to believe that, to the ancient peoples who told these stories around
campfires for generations, passing them along, then finally wrote them down and
collected them; then finally decided which of these stories belonged in the bible

– for these peoples it was more important to assert that God was in charge
than that God was loving or kind or straightforward. That was their lens.

It isn't ours. So what do we do with a story like this? Reject it? Ignore it?

Spiritualize it as a foreshadowing of the ultimate offering God himself made
of his only son, after three days, when he did not stay his hand?

What I propose to do with it is look at where it ends: with provision.

We read this story again because it reminds us of the world we live in,

a world in which young men, especially young men of color, are sacrificed daily
to the violence and interpretation of "rights" some hold more dear than life.

And we read this story because it reminds us of a core principle of our faith:

God is also active in the dark places of human experience,

or despite the dark places in us. Often we see God most clearly after,
or during, our darkest times. Let's look at the end of the story.

For part of this story is that God meets Abraham at his worst moment,

and Isaac at his. And when it looked like all was lost, God provided the ram.

Many Christians see in that a foreshadowing of the offering of the Lamb of God to set us free from a certain death. In the worst moment, God is there. But of course, we want God several moments before that.

We want the worst moment never to arrive.

But the Bible is full of “worst moments,” as are our lives, right?

For many, this period the world is enduring is one of the worst moments. One promise in this awful story is: God is there. Not always rescuing. But there.

We get no Easter morning without Good Friday, right?

When someone I love endured the catastrophic loss of a baby born prematurely, who lived for several weeks in the NICU, prayed for literally around the world, I couldn't fathom how the God who could heal her had not done so.

A friend reminded me how God does not prevent the messes in our lives; God shows up within them and transforms them into sources of healing. He wrote, “There could not be a bigger mess than Good Friday – the death of God's son – but look what happened Easter Sunday?”

We have the gift of this perspective, my friends, to see life from beyond the grave; In the light coming from that empty tomb.

That is the source of our hope, that is the source of our drive to bring about change and justice where history might tell us not to bother.

How can we eradicate a disease that has claimed millions of lives in four months?

How can we do away with the racism woven into every fabric of our lives?

Well, call me Pollyanna, but the disease is driving the pace of research - scientists will find a treatment or a vaccine.

And we have a moment right now to move the dial on racism – more white Americans than ever before are looking up and seeing a picture that had always been there, but they hadn't seen before.

They're taking the time to get educated, to listen to the experiences of people of color, to gather in study groups like we will tomorrow night.

This conversation has always been urgent, and yet we just couldn't get to it.

Well, now we can. George Floyd should not have died at all that day, and certainly not in the way he did. That was not God's will.

But God can work transformation, through the worst of circumstances.

God can work transformation through us.

It starts with our being people trained to expect blessing.

I've probably told this story before of the day I learned to expect blessing.

My cat had gone into complete heart failure a few weeks earlier, and been brought back from the brink with an overnight stay at a very expensive vet. This day, I saw similar signs in her breathing, and I was panicked. I made an appointment with my own vet for the afternoon, and went to work to distract myself. Every moment I was praying, "Please God, please God, please God." I remember walking down the stairs to my office, praying, and suddenly having this thought in my head: "Expect blessing. You don't have to beg – expect blessing." "Huh?" I thought, and then this: Oh yeah. God is in the business of blessing. Expect blessing. So every time the anxiety came up, I turned it into this prayer, "Expect blessing." We don't always get the blessing where we ask for it – it may come somewhere else in our life that day – but expect blessing.

There is always blessing in our life in God.

This completely revolutionized my prayer life, my faith life. I shared it with my sister, and she was galvanized, and shared it with her friends. A circle of blessing.

And this goes further: When we expect blessing, we become agents of blessing. We might be the one to find the ram in the thicket when someone is at the end of their tether.

Jesus said, ... *and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*"

We might be the one who shares a cup of water with one of God's beloveds at the end of their rope. We know a world of hurt is out there, and likely to get more intense as this virus spreads. We get to be water-bearers, my friends.

We can ask God to show us who we can share our resources with.

Now, Jesus is referring to those who are not his disciples, who help those who are his disciples in their ministry.

This is a season for us to be strengthening our connections beyond our congregations.

There are a few people from the wider community joining our book study –

That gives us an opportunity to build a stronger network for bringing water.

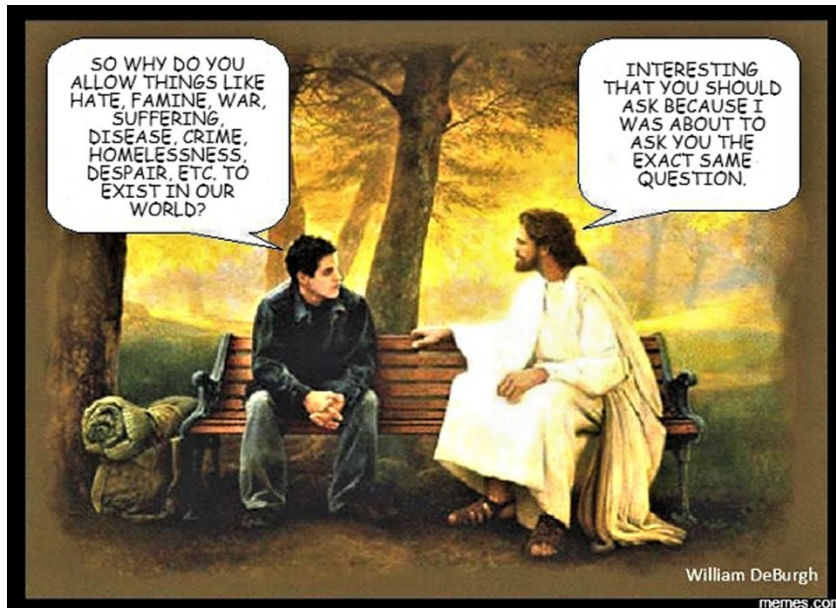
I recently posted a cartoon on Facebook that shows a young man talking with Jesus on a park bench. The young man says,

"So why do you allow things like hate, famine, war, suffering, disease, crime, homelessness, despair, to exist in our world?" And Jesus answers, "Interesting that you should ask, because I was about to ask you the same thing."

God is still in the business of showing up at the worst of moments, in the deepest pain and crisis, and bringing transformation, provision. But God has chosen to work through us.

We cannot do it with God, and for whatever reason,
God has chosen not to do it without us.
Where will God show up through you this week?

Amen.



Matthew 10:40-42

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Genesis 22:1-14

God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He 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 that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."