Please pray with me. Holy One, as we listen to the lessons of faith, trust and promise, help us to really listen. Help us to understand more deeply how the stories of our ancestors in faith are truly our stories – just lived several hundred years later. Amen.

Sometimes I choose my sermon titles too early, but I generally have the bulletin and newsletter done before I start my sermon. This is one of those weeks because I would now title my sermon, “The Lord Gives. The Lord Takes Away” which made me think of last week’s story and the little boy who wrote an explanation of God and ended it with, “I figure God put me here and he can take me back anytime he pleases.”

As I pondered which Biblical hero to talk about this week, I began to realize that we really left Abraham before the end of his story last week. We travelled through many years with Abram and Sarai, but left them soon after God had renamed them Abraham and Sarah and had given them the gift of a child through whom their legacy would be descendants as great as the stars in the sky.

This child, Isaac, made them very happy, but things were still not all rosy. As Isaac grew and was weaned, Abraham prepared a great feast, but Sarah became upset when she saw Ishmael, the son her slave girl Hagar had born to Abraham, at Sarah’s suggestion no less, playing with her son, Isaac and told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away because she did not want Hagar’s son inheriting with her son. Now Abraham was very distressed by this, but God told him not to worry, that
God would make a great nation of Ishmael as well, and he did, Ishmael is the father of the Muslim nation.

Now, I have not heard of any modern-day stories quite this drastic, but no doubt they do happen. However, I am all too familiar with the sad stories of blended families, sort of like the Brady Bunch on television, perhaps with not only children from two families, but then children from the present marriage as well. Human nature being what it is, sometimes Moms and Dads are protective of their own children and it becomes hard to treat all of the children equally especially when they aren’t all yours. But this happens as well in traditional families – some children are treated better than others and whatever the case, this is sad. Abraham’s story becomes our story when this happens.

As we grow older, we may narrow our expectations, but we still believe in the promise. We still believe that life is supposed to be good. So, when we read that Abraham received a promise that life would be good, we know what that means. The story of Abraham and Sarah is the story of our life. Abraham and Sarah received the promise when the angel first visited them and told them they were going to have a baby and Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah was 65 years old. They wait twenty-five years for the angel to return and tell them, now is the time, and Isaac is finally born to them. Abraham is now 100 years old. Sarah is ninety years old. We conclude from this that Isaac is the gift of grace. Isaac is a gift from God, a miracle. We know that Abraham and Sarah could not possibly, through biological means, produce this child. It is a gift to them. Life holds great promises, but the fulfillment of those promises comes from God. That's the point of the
story. And that is what Abraham and Sarah are called to trust in their life, that all the gifts given to us come from God. If only the story of Abraham could end there, an old couple having a baby. The promise is fulfilled and there will be descendants now as numerous as the stars, as the promise stated. But the story doesn't end there. Now God says, "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 a mountain of which I will tell you."

Now, I had classmates in seminary who tried to exegete this passage as a passage about child sacrifice, but the Jews never practiced child sacrifice. This is a theological point, although it is a tough passage to read and to understand. We are to understand what happens here in this scene in the context of that famous phrase, "The Lord has given. The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." The command to sacrifice Isaac is a test to see if Abraham really knows and trusts that our life is in God's hands. God is the Creator of life, not us. That is what it means to say, "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The opening line in the 22nd chapter of Genesis is this: "After all these things, God tested Abraham." The fulfillment of the promise of life comes from God alone. Now Abraham, and eventually each one of us, you and I, will be tested at some point in our life, if we haven’t already, as to whether or not we believe that all things come from God. Can we live in the faith that the God upon whom we depend is in fact trustworthy?
I read this story, and I tell you, I don't particularly like it because it is such a difficult story. But when I read it this time, more than once I will admit, I thought of the ways you and I are tested. Can we really believe that the God who has given us life in the first place, can give it to us again? If we lose all that we have, all the things we surround ourselves with, the things that bring us comfort, the things that bring us security in this life, the things that bring us pleasure in this life upon which we become dependent for meaning, purpose, and beauty in our life, can we let them go?

I thought of the pictures we see constantly in the newspaper and on television of the refugees overseas that are constantly being driven from their homes and lands. Of the immigrants who are flocking to our shores because of the terror and lack of food and water in their own lands. They lose everything except what they can carry.

Or, think of those who have lost everything, as many of our grandparents did in the great depression. Maybe some of you here this morning have been exposed to this through the habits of your parents who were exposed to it by their parents and habits of thrift don’t go away easily. They are passed down at least for a generation or so.

Then the most difficult application, letting go of somebody you love. It is no accident that one of the tasks of grief work is called "letting go," because that is what has to happen if you are going to have life again. It's like Isaac. You've got to let him go if you are going to receive your life back again. When somebody close to us dies, a part of us dies with that person. We want to hold on to that person

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because we believe that the promise life holds for us is tied up in our holding on. We don't really believe that life can be good again without that person. We ask, "Why did this thing have to happen to me? Why did God do this?" It is only if we have deep faith that we can grieve the loss while knowing that our loved one is in the arms of our Lord. And even then, it can be very hard work.

"The Lord gives. The Lord takes away." That is the first lesson of biblical wisdom. And it is the first step in living a successful and meaningful life, to know that God is God, and not you. Therefore, all that I have, and all that I am, comes from God. That's the test. That is the ultimate test for any one of us. Are you able to let go of everything in the trust that the Lord will deliver on the promise? That is the meaning of the sacrifice of Isaac. Do you trust that God, who gives the gift in the first place, can give it again?

The story has a happy ending after all. Isaac is laid on the altar, Abraham fully prepared to carry out the command. Then the voice of God intervenes, saying, "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 behold, there was a ram standing by. Abraham took the ram, and offered it as a burnt offering instead of his son."

Then comes the last line, and the most important line in this story. Abraham named that place, "The Lord will provide." Which is what he was asked to trust from the very beginning. He was tested over and over again to determine if he could believe, "The Lord will provide." The God who gives us life in the first place, is able to give it to us again. Amen.