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Lent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Killer Trials”

Text: Genesis 22:1-18; James 1:12-18; Mark 1:9-15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Abraham was called by our Lord when he was 75 years old. Abraham had been living in a place called Haran and was worshiping false gods (Joshua 24:2) until our Lord, in mercy, came to him. And when God called Abraham, He promised him a son - a son through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. Abraham believed this word of God, and waited for that son. He waited 25 years. When during those years, he got tired of waiting for God, he took matters into his own hands and had a son by his wife's maidservant - but that was not the son God had promised. It wasn't until he was one year short of 100 years old, and his wife Sarah was 90 years old - well past the normal age for having children - that God kept His promise. And Isaac was born. Isaac: the child of the promise; the one through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed.

But just a few years later, when Isaac was beginning to mature; that age when boys begin to grow into men and fathers begin to see the potential in their sons - God said: **sacrifice him**. Offer him to me as a burnt offering. . . . You can imagine the pain and the confusion that must have filled Abraham's heart. He had waited so long. And what about the promise? And not short and momentary was this trial - it took them *three days* to reach the place where God had said to do this, the land of Moriah. All along the way, each day, each step, must have been harder than the last for Abraham. When they arrived, each stone he lifted to build the altar must have been heavier than the last, matching the growing heaviness of his heart. And then when he bound his son, the knots in the rope were probably nothing compared to the knot in his stomach as he laid his son on the altar. Had the last 40 some years really been only to lead to this?

This was no small trial. We wonder how Abraham did it. But the answer lies not within Abraham, but in the Word and promise of God. If Abraham had relied on his own strength, on his own fortitude, on his own understanding and reason, he surely would have failed. He clung instead to the Word and promise of God. Believing that God *would* fulfill His promise - somehow, someday. Believing that God is good, even if what He commands *seems* bad. Believing that God would provide. And in the end (as we heard), God did.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial. James told us that today. But really, most of us would prefer to do without the trials. Our trials may not even be as big as Abraham's, but still, an easy life and an easy faith is what we want, isn't it? A life and faith free of doubts and fears; without the problems that come with growing older and weaker; unencumbered with worries about the future; and immune from the struggles and pains and heartaches and sadness of the world encroaching on our lives. Wouldn't that be good? Wouldn't that be better? Isn't that what the Christian life *should* be like?

Well, no. It would certainly be *easier*, but it would not be *better*, and as Abraham and many other places in the Scriptures show us, it is not what the Christian life is like. For note well that teaching of James: ***Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.*** Our Lord, who wants to bless us, send us trials to do so. And so to avoid the trials is to miss the blessing that our Lord would give through them. And so without the the trials, we would not be better off - but worse.

Now, sometimes this is misunderstood. And we misunderstand it if we take this teaching about trials and look at them the way we look at exercise - as something that we do and endure to make ourselves stronger. If we comfort ourselves with the thought that what doesn't kill us will make us stronger. If, in the midst of these trials we turn inward, and hunker down, and try harder to be someone God can be proud of. . . . That's not what God wants us to do, and it's not why He sends trials. That, in fact, is what the devil wants us to do. For when we turn inward and rely on ourselves, we are relying on someone very weak and vulnerable, who is easily deceived, and who often fails. Just consider how often you have made resolutions - either worldly or spiritual. How often have you kept them? And for how long?

No, God doesn't send trials, He doesn't put us through the testing fires, to give us a spiritual workout. **He sends them to kill us.** For notice in the story of Abraham and Isaac, Isaac wasn't the one who wound up being killed in the story - *it was really Abraham!* Abraham's life, Abraham's reason, Abraham's strength was slain by God, so that through this trial, God would raise Abraham to a new life. A new and stronger life of faith. Of faith not in himself or in Isaac, but only in the Word and promise of God. For only in the Word and promises of God is our life and our strength. God didn't need this test to see Abraham's faith - God already knows everything. Abraham needed this test to receive the life and blessing of God. The life and blessing he received because ***"he heard the voice of the Lord."*** Our English translations say "obeyed" there - but the verb is really "heard." And what Abraham heard, and believed, and clung to, was the Lord's Word and promise. The Word and promise that proved even greater than his obedience, greater than his strength, greater than his reason. The Word and promise through which we are blessed.

For the Word and promise of God that Abraham clung to, and that we cling to, is no mere word - but a Word and promise which became flesh. The son God promised Abraham would come *through* his son Isaac, but would ultimately be God's own Son. For it would be through Jesus that all the nations of the world would be blessed. Blessed with new life through His victory over sin, death, and the devil.

We heard of that victory begun in the Holy Gospel when, as soon as Jesus was baptized, He is driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by satan. Tempted with temptations that would have felled any of us - but not Him. He is victorious. For He is the man of whom James spoke - the man who remained steadfast under every trial and temptation, trusted in His Father fully and completely, even when it meant going to the cross, felled satan and all his power in His resurrection, and received the crown of life. But it was a crown He didn't need - it was already His. He won it for us. He won it in our place, that He might give it to us. That you and me and all people from all nations of the world be blessed through Him.

And blessed we are. For we are those, as James said, that ***our Lord has brought forth by His Word of truth***. His Word of truth spoken here in baptismal waters where we are slain and raised to a new life. His Word of truth spoken here in cleansing absolution where our sins and failure to remain steadfast are forgiven. His Word of truth spoken here that makes bread and wine His life-giving body and blood. And with all this Word His promise - that He is our Father, and that in His Son we are His sons. That He will not tempt us to evil. That He will give us only good. Even if the trials He sends seem not good; if what He commands seems unreasonable. He bids us not to rely on our own strength, our own fortitude, our own understanding and reason - but to rely on His Word and promise. To rely on His Son - the Word made flesh and the promise fulfilled. And if He needs to send trials to kill that old, impatient, doubting rebel in us, and give us the new life He has for us - then our loving Father will do that. Even if it means hard steps, a heavy heart, and a knot in your stomach for a while.

For in the end, God raised Abraham. He stopped the knife and fixed Abraham's eyes on a ram, a substitute. And today He raises us, and bids us fix our eyes on *the Lamb who went uncomplaining forth* (LSB #438) - ***to fix our eyes on Jesus***, our substitute. On Jesus, ***the author and perfecter of our faith***. The One who gave us our faith, and - through trials - tests and perfects it. That the temptations which lead to sin be quenched by His Word that leads to life. That we might open our mouths not in sin but in confession. That the desires of our hearts be not unholy but holy. That our hands be clenched not in fists but in prayer. That we might pray: *Our Father, who art in heaven . . . lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

For know that your Father wants only the best for you. That is what the devil does not want you to know or believe. He wants you to doubt that and look for the good you need somewhere else - *anywhere* else. To look to yourself, to look to the world, to look even to the devil himself. And many fall for it, thinking God not good; thinking Him mean and unfair; thinking Him unreasonable and tyrannical.

But what we think of God will not change Him. He will continue to work His good in the world, and in you. Sometimes even through trials, that we might ***repent and believe in the Gospel***. So turn to Him who has turned to you in the face of Jesus Christ. Come now and receive Him who came for you, that you might live and not die. That blessed with resurrection and forgiveness you live in Him and receive His crown of life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.