

“Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful: Rosalynn & Jimmy Carter & . . .”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 2, 2017

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Holy Scriptures: Genesis 22: 1-14 and Matthew 10: 40-42

Genesis 22: 1-14

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here 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 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.” He 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, 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 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I 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 shall provide; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Matthew 10:40-42

⁴⁰ “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ 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; ⁴² 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.”

Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful

Last week a friend was in our church hallway,

standing by a bulletin board,
looking at the poster that lists our summer sermon series.

The summer sermon series lists names of people suggested from the congregation,

including historical, biblical and personal lives that have impacted our faith.

She noticed that Rosalyn
n
and Jimmy Carter

are posted for this Sunday’s sermon, and she lit up.

“Oh my gosh, are Rosalyn
n
and Jimmy Carter speaking here on Sunday?”

I broke the truth while bringing her down gently.

“No, they will most likely be in Plains, Georgia,

where they go to church and the President teaches Sunday School.
But we will be here to share how their story and faith, gratitude and...”

She was already on her phone, Googling to see how long a trip it was to Plains.

Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful

Before one can delve into the life and times of these two souls

who touched our state, our nation, our world,
consider first who touched them.

Go to the primary source.

Again and again, the Carters reference their love for God and obedience God's Word.

President Carter has shared, *"You just have to have a simple faith.*

You can't divorce religious belief and public service.

I've never detected any conflict between God's will and my political duty.

If you violate one, you violate the other.

I don't claim to be knowledgeable about theology.

Most of my knowledge comes out of my experience and the lessons in the Bible.

Every Sunday I'm home I teach 45 minutes

and we boiled them down to one page for the new book,

"Through the Year with Jimmy Carter."

Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful

A primary biblical text that's impacted our collective experience of the Holy

is found in Genesis 12 & 22.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12: 1-3)

The Lord Spoke to Abram:

Trust in My Promise. I AM who I AM.

I AM will provide a land and legacy.

I AM will bless you and you shall be a blessing

God promised descendants, and in due time Abraham & Sarah had a son, Isaac.

Yet in God's eyes something was amiss.

God was not convinced of Abraham's gratitude.

Did Abraham only appreciate the gift of the child and not the Giver of the gift?

Suddenly the voice of God speaks with authority,

“with savage sovereignty” (Brueggemann),

with authoritative succinctness, with an unthinkable, unbearable command.

God said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” God 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.” (Gen. 22)

Abraham acts quickly to obey, to do God's will, to heed the terse instructions.

The story then shifts to the relationship between Abraham and Isaac.

Trust me because I trust the Lord, teaches the father to the son.

Let's walk the path wherever God leads, and we shall walk it together.

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.”

Walter Brueggemann notes that Abraham's response, "God...will provide"

*"...is the measured answer, telling us everything
except what we most want to know.*

Is the answer a loving deception of the boy?

Is it a direct lie by the father?

Is it a brute reference to a bloody obedience?

Is it an act of outrageous hope?" (Texts for Preaching, Year A, P. 382)

The story shifts once more, this time to Abraham and the Ram.

Here – at last! -- is evidence that the Lord follows through, provides, meets needs

At the final minute, an urgent call from God is heard.

Remember how initially God's voice was demanding, succinct, a stunning sovereignty?

Listen as the voice of the Holy One speaks with stunning generosity. (Brueggemann)

But the angel of 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.

The story shifts a final time, now featuring the historic reconciliation

between the Lord and a grateful parent and child.

Abraham and Isaac and the Lord move forward, together, in life and love,

called to Trust in the Promise and to honor Promises made in public and private.

Through this vivid narrative and language that has stood the test of time,

the whole people of God is aptly, succinctly, stunningly reminded:
Be grateful for the Giver of all good gifts.

Give thanks to the One who provides.
Remember daily who blesses us and makes of us a blessing.

*So Abraham called that place "The Lord shall provide;
as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."*

Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful

Jimmy Carter was a nuclear engineer and peanut farmer

when he campaigned for Governor of Georgia in 1970.

The state of Georgia, the south and our nation

took notice that this was a new breed of public servant leader
when Carter said, *"I say to you quite frankly
that the time for racial discrimination is over."*

This stance for reconciliation was historic.

His public proclamations were born of his gratitude

that God's reconciling love is for all people
and knows no barriers or borders or bounds.

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter took their holistic Christian faith to the White House,

not as a weapon to browbeat opponents into submission
or to use personal values to determine public policy,
but rather to inform and infuse their spirits of compassion
and to firm their resolve to stand tall for human rights.

Their inner convictions in Christ's love lead them to practice grace in the public arena.

President Carter said,

*"I hate to see complacency prevail in our lives
when it's so directly contrary to the teaching of Christ."*

With grace and wit and wisdom, Rosalynn was a breath of fresh air
for a nation coming out of the doldrums and distrust

generated by the
Vietnam
War and Watergate.

Rosalynn said:

*“One day, I made a remark that I might work with people with mental illness,
and somebody in the press heard it, and it was in the paper.*

And the more I thought about it and found out about it,

*the more I thought it was just a terrible situation with no attention.
And I've been working on it ever since.”*

“If you look at suicides, most of them are connected to depression.

*And the mental health system just fails them. It's so sad.
We know what to do.
We just don't do it.”*

“Do what you can to show you care about other people,

and you will make our world a better place.”

Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful

The Carter Presidency included the historic reconciliation

of Israel and Egypt at Camp David.

The world wept with joy and relief

when Egypt's Sadat and Israel's Begin and USA's Carter shook hands together.

This was followed by the historic reconciliation with China,

efforts to reduce Soviet and American stockpiles of nuclear weapons,
and the peaceful negotiation and release of the 56 Americans
held hostage in Iran for 444 days.

Yet, like John Quincy Adams, it was their work and play after their White House years

which may be their legacy.

The historic, reconciling love of Rosalynn and President Carter

has been seen hefting hammers at Habitat for Humanity builds

in Atlanta and around the world.

Their compassion for the diseased and for fragmented communities

has fueled the amazing works of the Carter Center.

Their commitment to basic civil rights like voting has taken them

to foreign lands to serve as international observers of elections.

And who here is not always a bit awed

that when they fly to wherever their faith takes them,
saying, "Here I am, Lord," they sit in Coach
and make sure to walk up and down the airplane aisle
to shake everyone's hand.

The hands that swing hammers for justice,

the hands that bring warring factions to the table for peacemaking,
the hands that open the Bible for truth and hope and guidance,
the hands that hold their grandchildren,
these same hands extend olive branches and hope to everyone they meet.

They do so because they are grateful to be blessed,

grateful to be a blessing,
grateful to be able to say, "Lord, Here I am,"
grateful that the Lord provides.

Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful

We who have been blessed are called to be a blessing.

We who have been loved are called to love.

We who have been forgiven are called to forgive.

We who have been served are called to serve.

We who have had our turn at being first are asked to slip toward the back of the line.

We who have been fed and had our thirst quenched at the Table of the Lord

are called to make room, to make an invitation, to make love real.

We who have benefited from justice and seen it from both sides

must now fight for the just treatment and rights
of our brothers and sisters in need.

We who have been invited to walk with God

are asked to do so humbly, honestly, with hands open and arms extended.

Lord, Make Us Truly Grateful

As much as the Carters have impacted our faith and nation,

who doesn't have a soft spot for his mother?

Let's give Lillian Carter the last word.

When Jimmy Carter was elected President in 1976,

the press wanted to interview his mother, Lillian Carter,
who was an amazing person in her own right *Peace Corps Volunteer at 65*.

The press loved her because she was so quotable.

Lillian Carter had said: *"I love all my children, but some of them I don't like."*

*"Middle age is when a guy keeps turning off lights
for economical rather than romantic reasons."*

President Carter, however, refused to allow the press to speak with her

until finally a compromise was reached.

The press agreed to only one reporter present, on Lillian's turf, in her home in Plains.

Jimmy said to his mother, "Please be careful."

She said, *"Oh, I will be."*

When the reporter showed up she welcomed him into her home.

He asked her, "Has the President ever told a lie?"

"No."

“Never?”

“Well, maybe a white lie.”

“What is a white lie?”

“For example, I told you a white lie when I said you were welcome in my home.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!