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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart!

We're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson.

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, here with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.

They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they're pretty good preachers.

All right, let's get started.

David, where are we in the church year?

David: This is the first Sunday in Lent.

Jessica: Happy Lent!

Peter: No, not happy, sadly.

David: Not happy, I know.

It's a period of repentance as we prepare for the celebration of the death and then the resurrection of Jesus.

Jessica: And Peter, what are the texts?

Peter: The texts are from Genesis 22, James 1, Mark 1, and the Psalm is Psalm 25.

Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach about since it is the first Sunday in Lent.

Is anybody wearing purple?

Purple socks?

David: Nope.

Peter: Nope.

Jessica: Nothing?

I guess then I will have to choose randomly.

David, you go first.

David: Okay, I will.

I am going to preach on the Gospel reading from Mark.

Lent one is always the temptation of Jesus.

So Jessica, if you could read verses 12 and 13.

Jessica: The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.

And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

David: Okay, so Jessica, when you think of the temptation of Jesus, what is missing in this account?

Jessica: Oh, all of the things that Satan said.

David: Right.

Peter: The temptations.

Jessica: Yes, right.

David: Temptations.

Jessica: Turn the stones into bread and cast yourself down.

David: Right, yeah.

So Luke and Matthew, they give a kind of an inside view of all the types of temptations that are happening.

And you have got the dialogue between Satan and Jesus.

You have got the answers of Jesus from, you know, the text of Scripture.

And when that happens, I think sometimes the temptation of Jesus sometimes strikes us as, you know, the model of how we have to act in temptation.

You know, we have to find that word of God to use against Satan and that type of a thing.

Mark takes that all away.

We do not have that.

We basically have Jesus in the wilderness 40 days tempted by Satan.

We are not told how.

And then for some reason, we are told he is with wild animals.

And we have got the angels ministering to him.

I mean, it is a very intriguing look at the temptation, which is kind of taking away the things that we are so familiar with and thrusting upon us things that we might not always think about.

Peter: That is interesting because sometimes, you know, you have to, people always paint a picture in their mind of what they see in a story or something.

You know, you just kind of automatically do that without even thinking about it.

And I fill in so much from other Gospels here.

That this is, you almost have to strip away.

The text actually does not say much of anything here.

David: And yet, with the little bit it says, I think it provides great comfort to us.

Comfort to us not in giving us a model on how to behave in the midst of temptation, but comfort to us by awakening us or alerting us to the presence of God in the midst of temptation.

And so that is kind of what I would be thinking about.

Is how this text awakens us to the presence of God in temptation.

And I just, I know this is kind of odd, but I'm just going to start here anyway, because this is how it came to my mind.

I had a friend who had passed away two years ago and it was the anniversary of her death.

And there was a picture of her that I saw.

And she was on a beach in Hawaii.

And so she was tanned.

She had this beautiful, beautiful white smile.

The ocean, just you know, from the shore all the way out, you could look and see the beauty of the ocean.

And then when you looked at the bottom of the photo, by her feet in the sand, were carved the words, fight like hell.

And it just is, it was a powerful reminder to me that your wilderness can be anywhere.

You know, I mean, you would think Hawaii would not be a wilderness.

It's a place of vacation.

It's a place of getting away from everything.

But for her, it was a wilderness.
She was in the middle of her fighting with cancer.
And even though she's there on that beach, she's in a wilderness.
And I think to myself, you know, you don't actually have to physically go into a wilderness to be in a wilderness.
You could be in a house that has two beautiful cars in the garage and all the food you want in the fridge and all the clothes you need in your closets.
And yet it's a wilderness because of the arguments you're constantly having with your spouse.
You could have a really great job.
You could have a really great group of friends.
And yet you're constantly battling depression, right?
I mean, our wildernesses can be anywhere.
And so a story that tells us about the wilderness, but doesn't really take us into it, but just tells us about it is awakening us to think about where is God in all of this wilderness experience?
And I think the first thing you see is basically that God is in control.
So verse 12, Jessica, read verse 12 again.

Jessica: The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

David: Okay.

So God's in control.

It's not like Jesus accidentally stepped into the wilderness.

It's not like Jesus wandered and left the ways of God and ended up in the wilderness.

The Spirit that he had received in baptism actually throws him out there.

So God is in control when you are in a wilderness area in your life, the biggest fear is that it is out of control.

That God is nowhere to be found, that I am so far away from God.

And yet here we see that the Spirit of God does thrust people into the wilderness.

Peter: Yeah.

That's at the same time comforting and disturbing.

Because God drives there.

And God is there as much as he is in paradise.

And if that's all you know of God, then that's really disturbing.

David: But we know that God has a purpose, that God is at work.

And we've got promises from God about the things he does in the midst of suffering.

You think about suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, character hope.

We've got lots of stories in scripture.

Paul's struggle with the thorn in his flesh and this is that my grace might be sufficient for you.

So there's a lot of promises about what God is doing.

But I think the first thing to recognize is that when you're in the wilderness, you're not lost.

That God is still in control.

God is still in control.

He has claimed your life in baptism.
The Spirit is within you in baptism.
And sometimes you're brought into places that are wilderness places.
But do not be afraid.
Your God is in control.
That would be my first point, I think, would be that God is in control.
The second one would be that God is present and caring for you.
We have the mention that the angels were ministering to him.
And angels are these angelic, invisible, spiritual beings that God has created for service to him and to his people.
And when you're in the wilderness, God has angels that are there to care for you.
You know, we may not be cared for by an angel, but we may be cared for by a friend.
And then we say to them, you know, you're like an angel.
You're like a messenger.

Peter: One sent by God.

David: One sent by God.

For the purpose of care.

So the next portion, right, where immediately Jesus bursts on the scene and he starts proclaiming the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand.

For me, that's where we're getting the sense that this is all part of a much larger ministry.

And this is a moment when Jesus is tempted, God is in control, God is present and caring for him, God is bringing about a new creation.

And when Jesus comes on the scene in his public ministry, the first thing out of his mouth is that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, right?

That this working of God of all things toward good, toward creation, toward restoration in Jesus Christ, that's what's happening here, even though it looks the exact opposite of it.

That I'm lost in the wilderness, Satan is tempting me, and I am alone among strange things in a strange land.

And yet, no, God is in control, he's present and caring for you, and he's working toward a new creation.

That would be kind of the three things I think I'd lean into.

Peter: Yeah, I think that I think that could be really comforting to those who are experiencing the temptation in their own wilderness, the temptation to question God's promises.

Here you're proclaiming his promises clearly and fully.

Jessica: Peter, what would you preach on?

Peter: I'm looking at Genesis 22.

David: Oh my.

Jessica: Oh good.

Peter: Why do you say, oh my, you say good.

I want to hear both.

David: Jessica, you go first.

Jessica: Sacrifice of Isaac.

That is loaded.

That's so loaded.

There's so many things going on in that story and so many different interpretations and misinterpretations and red hot feelings about it.

I remember the first time I heard someone reading this text, I was just a kid in church and the person started crying.

They couldn't get through the reading.

And I didn't know why.

And I found out later, my mom told me they couldn't have children and they were trying and trying and trying.

David: Wow.

Jessica: Yeah.

So talk about Sacrifice of Isaac, please.

Peter: Well, now I'm worried.

What you said, oh my.

David: I know, because it's hard.

It is so hard.

I mean, the subject matter is so difficult and just painful, painful subject matter.

And you know, and I often, I often, when I read this text, for some reason I put myself in the place of Isaac.

And what would it be like to have your dad trying to kill you?

Yeah.

I mean, how would that affect the rest of your life?

Right.

And it's just so, you know, because a lot of people, you look at it, oh, well, you know, God saved him and he walks away.

Well, Isaac will always live with the memory of his dad laying on the altar about to kill him.

And it's just like, it's a struggle.

So yeah, go for it Peter.

Peter: Well, see, now this is actually interesting because you think about what would Isaac, what would Isaac and Abraham would have talked about years after with this episode?

Jessica: Did they still talk years later?

Peter: I think you actually could, at least what I want to do with this sermon could give you something to talk about that would maybe hopefully be constructive.

So at any rate, I chose Genesis 22 because it's the first Sunday in Lent.

And Lent to me is, I've got a conflicted relationship with Lent because I love a lot of the Lenten hymns, but I also don't like how Lent is made such a big deal sometimes.

We talk about it as a season of repentance and yet the Christian life is one of repentance.

There's 95, his first thesis, the entire Christian life.

So why are we saying, now this is really, really a season of repentance.

I don't really like a whole lot the idea of self-denial.

I'm going to give up something because the whole Christian life is one of deny yourself,

follow me.

So it almost, Lent to me is kind of like one of those times where we, for good reason, we're trying to think about preparing to celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection, but we end up focusing on ourselves.

I think a lot, our repentance, our acts of self-denial.

And so what I would like to do in this sermon is to move us away from thinking about ourselves, move your hearers away from thinking about themselves.

Instead think about, well, in this case, I'm going to say the voice of God.

I want to draw attention to the voice of God.

And so Jessica, would you start by reading verse 15 to 18.

Jessica: And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, by myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and you have not withheld your son, your only son.

I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.

And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies and in your offspring all the nations of the earth will be blessed because you have obeyed my voice.

Peter: Okay, it's that last phrase that kind of caught my attention.

You have obeyed my voice.

And I read that at the end and then I went back and just noted what does God actually say in this text?

What voice did Abraham hear?

And what I think you could do is emphasize just what he heard.

You could retell this story, kind of a narrative type sermon where you would help people bring them into this narrative and have the movement of the sermon based on the things that God said to Abraham.

So the theme would be something about kind of living by God's voice, almost setting the tone for Lent, where Lent is a time where the Christians will attune themselves to God's voice rather than thinking about what I'm doing, what I'm giving them.

David: Nice, okay.

So that's why it's, that's kind of how you're dealing with your struggles with Lent and this is going to be a corrective then.

Peter: It's going to be a corrective and kind of set the tone.

David: And get our eyes focused on God.

Peter: Right.

David: Right.

Peter: You don't get into Abraham's mind, but his actions suggest absolute confidence that what God has promised to him will come to pass and so he will do anything, anything the voice says.

And so with that in mind, I want to think about what does the voice say in this text?

Now at some point you're going to need to, partially because it's in verse 15 to 18, which I brought up earlier, which you read earlier, Jessica, that hearkens back to the promise of Genesis 12, right, where God says to Abraham, I'm going to make you a blessing

to all nations.

And so that voice that he's heard chapters earlier is going to be kind of in the background. I'm not quite sure exactly how I would bring that into the sermon.

But in the text itself, you've got two moments where the voice speaks before that last one at the end.

The first one is in verse 22.

After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, Abraham says, here I am.

And then he says, take your son and offer him as a burnt offering.

And so the first thing that Abraham hears from the voice is this command that is impossible.

And this gets to the kind of the emotional piece.

It is impossible to imagine, unless you're a psychopath, actually heeding this voice.

There's no way.

There's no way.

You just couldn't do this.

There's no way.

David: And the voice actually seems to know that, right?

Because it says your only son, whom you love.

So we've got these, the voice is extending, God's voice is extending the description of the son.

And emphasizing that, you know, this is your only son and this is the only son that you love.

Peter: Like, I know what you're going to say.

David: Right.

And yeah.

So even in the face of knowing that, the voice still says this.

Peter: Right.

David: Yeah.

Peter: Right.

And so you've got Abraham.

I mean, the text is so lean in a sense.

It doesn't give us any insight into what's going on in Abraham's heart or his mind.

He just, the next verse, so Abraham rose early in the morning, settled his donkey and took two of his young men with him and his son, Isaac.

He just, he obeys.

And that's incredible.

So you've got this first movement, the voice is, notice, he calls Abraham by name.

David: Okay.

Peter: The name that he has given him, this is no longer Abram from chapter 12, it's Abraham.

He calls him by name and he calls him to an impossible task.

Then the story unfolds and in the sermon, I think I would kind of retell the story and help here's appreciate what's going on.

And then you jump all the way down to 11.

Would you read Jessica 11 and 12?

Jessica: 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, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.

Peter: So you've got the first command is to take your son and sacrifice him. The second command is don't lay hand on the boy. Don't do anything. Now both of those are commands that Abraham obeyed. The first one, it's kind of incredible that he would obey. The second one, of course, everyone kind of breathes this incredible sigh of relief that, okay, thank goodness he doesn't have to. But both of them are still just, this is a man, Abraham, who obeys the voice of God in times that make sense and in times that make no sense. In times that you're happy to obey, in times that you are, that you're got to be torn up on the inside to even consider obeying. And yet this is what faith looks like. It's the promise that God spoke to Abraham in the beginning, Genesis 12, and then the promise that he repeats here in 17 and 18. God says, I will bless you. I will multiply your offspring and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. That promise is what leads to this listening to the voice of God. Because of that promise, we can listen and obey even when it's really hard. Now to get the gospel clear here in Mark 1, verse 11, and a voice came from heaven, you are my beloved son with you, I am well pleased. This is where the voice, it's interesting to me that the voice, I even looked this up in the Septuagint, it's the same word for voice in the Greek Old Testament and the Greek in Mark, that this voice that Abraham heard is a voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism. You are my son with you, I am well pleased. And then that invites a reflection on, well, who is this Jesus? How is he the fulfillment of this promise of blessing to all nations? We follow, we obey because of this blessing that he has given us in Jesus.

Jessica: What would you say to the person in the pew who is hearing the story kind of out of context that maybe would not be familiar with the whole, the rest of scripture that pointed to the character of God? And they heard this story, not just God asking him to do something hard, but God asked him to do something that's wrong. I mean, this is before the Ten Commandments, but it's after Cain and Abel. You know, what would you say to somebody who heard this and it made them think that God was inconsistent and would ask people to do something wrong?

Peter: Well, I think this is where you have to be a little careful with what you say about what people should expect God to say to them.

Abraham in a sense one of a kind here, that God came and promised blessings to all nations through him.

And then God speaks to him directly in these ways and calls him to obey no matter what.

God doesn't say this to us.

God doesn't say, take your son, your only son and sacrifice him.

I mean, a little bit of this is understanding the Bible.

We don't always help ourselves if we think of the Bible as God's message directly to individuals today, because then people are tempted to pick and choose or sometimes be told what applies to them and what doesn't.

We have to take pretty seriously, we live according to the word of the apostles today, and there's no indication we should do anything like that again.

And we shouldn't expect God to be coming and contradict himself.

That's not what's going on here at all.

What's going on here is a man who has heard God's voice of promise and obeys no matter what.

Jessica: How do we know what the voice of God is?

How do we tell the difference between the voice and our head?

Where do we find it?

Peter: Well, John tells us to test the spirits, right?

And he turns our attention to Jesus.

What has Jesus said?

Of course, the one who is risen from the dead kind of gets to say whatever he says we obey.

And he said to the apostles, you go teach everything I have commanded you.

And so the apostles writing and speaking and ultimately giving us the New Testament, you want to hear God's voice, you want to hear the voice of Jesus, you read the Bible.

And you read specifically the New Testament as it applies to Christians today.

And that's where you do have to read the Bible carefully because we don't just take this verse out of context from Genesis and apply it to Christians today.

In fact, we would test this against God's clear word through the apostles in the New Testament.

David: And deep fear, I mean, this story touches into a deep fear.

It really does.

You know, in any situation of child abuse would be triggered, I think.

Peter: Yeah, I think you probably should be maybe explicit about this is not what God says to you.

This is not what he says to us.

We obey the voice of the one that Jesus will last week in the Transfiguration.

What did the text, the voice from heaven say?

Listen to him, to Jesus.

And Jesus doesn't say anything near this kind of command.

David: You should write a book on that.

You already did.

Jessica: What book did you write on this?

Peter: It's called These Are Written Toward a Cruciform Theology of Scripture.
It was a book on the theology of scripture, kind of why do we believe the scriptures are God's word?
These canonical writings.
Why do we believe these are totally reliable and true?
And how should we read them?
And how do we make sense of interpretation and authority, these questions?
And it does all come down to Jesus and his resurrection.
And we listen to the scriptures because Jesus rose from the dead.
One of the things I want to emphasize is that the voice of God, God called Abraham by his name.
He called him Abraham.
And God, one of the clearest things that God has said to each of us in our baptism is he has called us by name.
He has called us his own.
He said, you are mine.
And to that we say, here am I ready, even if I'm a little scared to follow whatever you say.

Jessica: That's all for today.
We have free resources to guide your next step in planning at ConcordiaTheology.org.
You'll also find episodes of our other podcast, Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.
I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, but I'll be pointing to the ways in which faith permeates all aspects of life.
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I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.
Join us next time here at Lectionary Kickstart when Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger will spark your thoughts for next Sunday.

Jessica: Happy Lent!

Peter: No, not happy, sad Lent.