God spoke: “My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham” (Gn 17:4-5). God promised Abraham that his wife Sarah would bear a son and the response of Abraham was one of disbelief. “Abraham fell face down and laughed as he said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah give birth at ninety?’” (17:17). God never gives up on his covenants although he often does grow weary when his covenant partners falter or even abandon a covenant.

In the next chapter of Genesis, the LORD appeared to Abraham differently. “Looking up, [Abraham] saw three men standing near him.” (18:3) One speaks and predicts that Sarah will have a son the next year. Sarah knew she was well beyond child-bearing years and she too laughed although more quietly to herself (18:10,12).

Despite the reaction of laughter and one might conjecture disbelief, God still honors the covenant and a year later, Sarah will give birth to their son. They named him Isaac which means “laughter” or “he will laugh.” Disbelief has now turned to the joy of a newborn. Sarah then said, “God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me. Who would ever have told Abraham … that [I] would nurse children! Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” (21:7-8)

When Isaac grew, God tested Abraham by telling him to take his son and offer him as a burnt sacrifice (22:2). Abraham had learned to trust God. He took it on faith that God would provide him descendants more numerous than the stars, even though he had no idea how God would accomplish this.

As Abraham prepared an altar of sacrifice, Isaac wondered, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”(22:7) “My son,” Abraham answered, “God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering” (22:8). Before Abraham could lay a finger on his son, the angel of the Lord stopped him and said, “Do not lay a hand on the boy” (22:11). God spared Isaac and provided a ram for Abraham and Isaac to sacrifice as a burnt offering. Abraham named that place Yahweh-yireh; hence people today say, “On the mountain the LORD will provide.” (22:14)

Amidst the coronavirus pandemic, we see many first responders, doctors, and nurses who are selflessly giving of themselves in order to help others. With every heroic sacrifice, also comes the possibility of the loss of an individual’s life. To date, 100 priests have died. Sadly, more than 47,000 other people have died as well.

As we approach Holy Week, the story of Abraham and Isaac takes on a much deeper significance. Jesus, the Son of God, goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42). Isaac was spared at Yahweh-yireh where God provided a sacrificial ram. At Calvary, Jesus willingly sacrificed his life for us. In Jerusalem, on the cross, God provides and offers his Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

And not knowing exactly how God will provide, we bring a constant stream of prayers before God asking him to bring a swift and decisive end to the worldwide pandemic. Everyone is pained at the suspension of Masses and the closing of church buildings. Bishop Chad Zielinski of the Diocese of Fairbanks invites each of us to turn more intently and deeply toward Christ. Please join the bishop, and the priests and religious of the Diocese, in a Day of Fasting and Prayer this Friday, April 3rd. Ask for the grace to draw closer to Christ and pray for an end to this pandemic. Also wherever possible, please set aside family time to pray in an intentional way.