

Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 89:1-4,15-18
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Proper 8A, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost
St Paul's, Port Townsend
June 26, 2011

Last week when we gathered to reflect on the sermon, we talked a bit about the liturgical year – about how the lectionary – the reading selections offered for any given Sunday - changes when we move out of the great cycle of feasts into this long, luxurious stretch of ordinary time. Advent and Christmas and Epiphany and Lent and Easter – these great festal seasons offer us the stories of incarnation and crucifixion and resurrection and ascension. But the Gospel readings in ordinary time move away from these great themes. They move away from all of that big, mysterious sort of other-worldly stuff, in to the day to day life and teachings of Jesus' earthly ministry. In Gospel time, we feel like we can settle in and take a lesson – today that lesson speaks of God's hospitality and how we are to take up that hospitality ourselves. But the Hebrew Scriptures? The lectionary offerings of the Hebrew scriptures just now, are the wonderfully rich stories of salvation history. Last week, we heard that beautiful story of the evenings and the mornings of each element of God's glorious creation. And this week, we hear the not-so-beautiful story of the sacrifice of Isaac. But apparent beauty or not, these are our stories – the ones we tell at the Easter Vigil, the stories that tell of the making of God's people, of the salvation history essential to our Easter proclamation that Christ is risen! These are the stories we tell to remember that our history goes on from before time and to forever because of the resurrected life in Jesus Christ. So it's important to know them – to grapple with them and to wrestle some meaning out of them. We could have read Jeremiah this morning, instead... perhaps any preacher with a brain in her head would have chosen Jeremiah! But there are things we need to know from this story of God and Abraham and Isaac, and if we turn away, we will miss them.

What is fascinating to me about this passage is that it is possible to read it and have very little understanding of Abraham or Isaac's feelings...

- God instructs Abraham to offer his son in sacrifice.
- Abraham gets up early the next morning to make preparations and then to go to the appointed place.
- When they arrive at the appointed place, Abraham instructs the slaves to stay put while he and the boy worship.
- Abraham builds the altar.
- He binds Isaac.
- He raises the knife to kill Isaac.
- He is instructed not to kill Isaac.
- He doesn't kill Isaac.
- He sees a ram.
- He kills the ram and makes it the sacrifice.

That's one way to read it. It actually might even be the easiest way to read it. To leave it cold and stark and emotionless. But if we look a little more closely, we will see glimpses of courage and concern, of companionability and tenderness. It is very, very important to recognize those things. They do make the story harder to take in – when we see them, we can't pretend that Abraham isn't affected by what is being asked of him or of Isaac. But when we recognize that for Abraham, Isaac is the precious and beloved son who was the miracle from God who by rights never even should have been born, the promise through whom Israel would go on forever, it makes it harder, rather than easier to understand how he could have contemplated sacrificing this life. And what is even more difficult than that, is to imagine that God, our God, would have asked him to do it.

God tested Abraham. I do not like these words. I can do something reasonable and theologically sound and even work the faithfulness and loving heart of a generous God into all of the rest of the story. But those words *God tested Abraham* have absolutely confounded me. They seem to portray a God who is cruel. A God who would torture his admittedly human but very faithful servant, Abraham. Whether or not we are parents, we can all imagine how tortuous it would be to be asked to take a life – the life of a child – as a sacrificial offering. I know better than to be entrapped in the dualism that says there is a harsh judging God in the Old Testament, but a loving, compassionate God in the New Testament. God is God. And still, this whole thing seems too hard to take in.

Why would God put Abraham to the test? This test? The one that asks him to sacrifice his son? What does this say about God's character? What kind of God would make this demand? And if God asked this of Abraham, what might God ask of me? Of you? Of us?

It is important to remember the context of this story, a story of God's chosen people, people who had been tested by flood and famine, forsaking God and feeling that God had forsaken them. Even in the midst of God's promise to these people, their lives had been fraught with profound trials and tribulations. For the Israelites, there had been many, many tests of their faith and of God's faithfulness. So think about the lives this story was made of and the lives this story was spoken in to, and know that they are not our lives today. This is a story from a time when people knew far more about sacrifice than we could begin to imagine. A story of people living in a world where human sacrifice was a regular part of life. It doesn't take the sting out of it, but it tells us something of the myriad ways sacrifice has shown itself throughout time. And it might even speak to us of a God who says "*This is the end of it. There will be no more human sacrifice*" rather than a God who says "*Sacrifice your son.*" I imagine that is actually an important aspect of all of this... God knew what he was asking - as it turned out, God was the one to sacrifice his son, his only son, the son whom he loved...

Abraham knew about sacrifice. He gave up his home and everything precious to him because God told him to get up and go to a new place. And when he was given Isaac, he was willing to give him up to. Abraham knew that in Isaac, God had already made life out of barrenness – what in those days would have been comparable to "death." Isaac's life was a miracle from God, given by God as pure gift. Isaac belonged to God - Abraham was clear about that. So for God to test Abraham by asking for Isaac as a human sacrifice, was for both God and Abraham to learn the extent of each other's faithfulness.

Understanding that, it remains difficult to understand why God would make this difficult demand. And I can't imagine that any interpretation of this story will ever wrap it up, clean it up, or make it somehow perfectly agreeable to us. This is a most mysterious story. It offers us questions that can't be precisely or easily answered. It's because it is a story about trust, and faith, and mystery that is God. That's the rub, isn't it? When we can't explain something of God, there are really only a couple of choices... we can trust God, or disregard God.

God tested Abraham. And perhaps Abraham tested God too, this God who had promised a land and a covenant, an identity and a future. "Look toward heaven" God had said to him. "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them... so shall your descendants be."¹ Would the God who had demanded so much from Abraham, the God he had served so faithfully – not perfectly, but faithfully – would this God who had given Isaac as the promise of the future of all Israel, would this God take it all away? Maybe **Abraham** needed to know. Maybe **Abraham needed** to test God.

God tested Abraham. As it turns out, those might be the just-right words, if when we hear them we think about faithfulness. Those words are profound indicators of the seriousness, the gravity, the essential trusting nature of a life of faith. Whether or not the notion that "God tests" is our own experience, it WAS the experience of God's people, Israel. Read their story – they were mightily tested over and over again. For these people, everything – test or otherwise - was of God. For Abraham and his people, to say "God tested" was to say that God was still engaged with them, that their faithful response mattered deeply to God. That their trust was of paramount importance to their future because to remain faithful meant to remain in relationship with their God who would always provide. Israel would have been lost without God's provision – be it the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven or water from a stone.

My experience is not of a God who tests us, and yet I have felt sorely tested in my life. There have been times when I felt so broken and bereft that I couldn't imagine any possibility of finding my way through. Most of us who have walked around on the planet for any significant period of time, have felt sorely tested. But my experience is not that God is the tester. My experience is of a God who comes alongside us in everything we encounter and every single time we feel we are being put to the test. It's what happened with Abraham too... we just need not to be too quick to layer our own interpretations on the life of a faithful man who lived in a way we will never understand, in a culture that existed thousands of years ago. Abraham did what God commanded. God did what God promised. Having tested each other's faithfulness over and over again, they deepened their relationship. This faithfulness wasn't blind obedience, and it wasn't blind love. *It was the conscious and active decision to trust in the face of not understanding.* We have our own versions of this sort of faithfulness – engaging and building and trusting during the deepest difficulties in our partnerships, with our children, our aging parents, our friendships, our work lives, and even in our lives in this

¹ Genesis15:5-6

community. There are always tests. And in the midst of all of the trials and tribulations that feel like tests in our lives, God is faithful.

This story about God and Abraham and Isaac seems to me to be a story about mutuality and reciprocity, about God in us and us in God. The God who loves us is always faithful. What we can learn from this story is that when we offer all that is dear to us, all that is painful to us, all that has hurt us, all that we are and all that we have back to the God who has given every good gift and who turns everything into love; when we give over to God, God gives again more than we could ever ask or imagine...

The Rev. Karen Haigt