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Genesis 22:1-14  
Psalm 13  
Romans 6:12-23  
Matthew 10:40-42

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Year A

## Welcome

Good morning. Welcome. It's good to be alive and together on this beautiful Sunday.

God says to Abraham, "*Abraham,*" and Abraham says, "*Here I am.*" God says, "*Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love ... and offer him ... as a burnt offering on [a mountain] that I shall show you.*"

Isaac. The longed-for son of Sarah and Abraham, who came to them on a promise given by three strangers that Abraham had welcomed to his home. The Bible doesn't say how Abraham felt about the strangers showing up on his doorstep. It just says that he rushed to welcome them. And the Bible doesn't say how he feels now, at this surely very unwelcome message. It just says that he calls to his son, and cuts some wood, and they set off on the road in one of the most disturbing and compelling stories in all of Hebrew scripture.

Now this is a very old story. It's an old story even compared to many other stories in the Bible. It is one of a set of foundational stories for three great world religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the version that appears in our Bible, Isaac is the son to be sacrificed. In other early versions of this same story, Ishmael is the son Abraham takes up the mountainside. Other versions still don't even name the son. It's just "your son, your only son, whom you love."

Many commentators have grappled with this story over the centuries. I am not going to review or try to duplicate their efforts. And I'm not going to talk about the practice of child sacrifice in ancient cultures, especially as viewed through the practice of child-rearing in modern cultures. For me this is a story about what God knows, and doesn't know, and needs to know for God's promises to come true. I think the story is about love.

Here's a story from my own life that came to me as I read about Abraham and Isaac over and over in the past few weeks.

I was sitting in my family doctor's office. This happened more than 20 years ago. I've just explained to my doctor that I've been under a good deal of stress. My writing's not going well. I'm working on my third novel—my first two are unpublished, and you could paper my house in rejection slips—and now I'm working my third novel, and the words just aren't coming. I'm blocked, and this has been going on for weeks. I've tried everything, including that time-honored writer's crutch—booze—but nothing has worked. (I'm lucky booze didn't work.)

I'm a wreck, not sleeping at night, hyper-ventilating during the day. I'm here in his office because I want him to give me a pill that will calm everything down, so I can write.

My doctor says, You're feeling this anxiety because you can't write, and you can't write because of all this anxiety? That's it exactly, I say. He shrugs and says, "Maybe you should give up writing."

*What?!? No, no, no, no! That can't be right! Not listening, not listening!*

My doctor, God bless him, did not give me a pill. Instead, he prescribed what he always prescribed when I came in with mysterious symptoms of anxiety and stress: more exercise. (He was a pretty good doctor.)

I went home frustrated, angry, and afraid. Afraid because I am a writer. Writing is what makes the world make sense. So his suggestion that maybe I should give up writing, was like saying, maybe you should stop being you. I did not welcome his message. And yet I do think, at that moment, he was a prophet of God for me. Because his very unwelcome words woke me up to just what was at stake. After all, I wasn't writing. I was losing it anyway.

And – I don't remember the exact relationship in time between these two events, but it was in the same period, weeks, or possibly a few months after that conversation in my doctor's office, that I was sitting and struggling at my desk, and a prayer came into my mind. I wrote it down. The words just came—easy—not like the struggles with the novel.

It was this same prayer, years later, that would appear on the first page of my first published book, *Stumbling Toward God*.

Dear God, sustain me in my hour of need.

Stay with me; be my friend.

When I misstep, light my path.

When I hurt, comfort me.

Help me see that I'm not the only one in pain.

Give me the strength to accept myself for what I am.

Amen.

In my doctor's office, I'd had no thought of writing that prayer, or any prayer. I didn't even believe in God! I was trying to write this steamy romance novel, with no clue that God had other ideas, other topics in mind for me. I only knew that I seemed to be losing what I valued most.

For the gate in my writing to open up, I had to let go – let go of my definition of what it meant for me to be a writer—let go of the steamy romance—and let God set my writing course.

*Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."*

And God says, Stop. For now I know.

For better or worse, we human beings are given the power to choose, which means that God can't know where Abraham's first loyalties lie until Abraham offers God everything. And it seems to me that in this story, a foundational story for God's Chosen People, God needs to know.

And when God does know the astounding depth of Abraham's faith, then the covenant opens up and the gift that will bless Abraham and Sarah and all the world is offered and received: *"I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven ... by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."* (Gen 22:17-18)

This morning's Gospel reading come at the close of what's sometimes called the mission discourse, in which Jesus sends the 12 disciples out to do the same kind of traveling ministry that he's been doing. He tells them what to take, how to conduct themselves, what to expect.

Then in closing Jesus says, “*Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.*”

‘When you carry my message and ministry,’ Jesus is saying, ‘it is me you are carrying, and whoever welcomes you welcomes me and my Father who sent me, God of Abraham and Sarah, and of Isaac, and of all of us.’

Then he goes on to say, “*Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet [that is, for being a prophet] will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person [for being a righteous person] will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones [he's probably not talking about children here, but about new disciples, people who are young in faith] 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.*”<sup>1</sup>

So it isn't just the ordinary welcome – “Thanks for coming, please come in. Would you like a cup of tea?” (Thinking to myself, if I don't agree with something you say, I'll just nod politely, and ignore every word.)

Welcoming a prophet for being a prophet means being open to the message that the prophet brings. And prophets—such as my dear old doctor—do not always bring welcome news.

This is a radical kind of welcome, willing to see the world anew, even if that means giving up familiar and comfortable ways of seeing. Jesus is talking about a welcome that says, “Thank you for coming, please come in and turn my world upside down.” This is the

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<sup>1</sup> The word “name” is commonly used in the Bible to refer to a person's essential nature, or to who a person really is. (Commentary from *New Interpreter's Study Bible*.) Here's the way the New International Version translates the same text: “Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.”

welcome God looks for and longs for and needs to have, ready to offer in return amazing rewards: work with meaning, a purpose beyond our wildest imaginations, abundant life.

I'm going to close by reading a poem by the 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic poet, Rumi—also a child of Abraham—called The Guest House.

## The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

-- Jelaluddin Rumi, from *The Illuminated Rumi*,  
Broadway Books, 1997, translation by Coleman Barks

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## Extra Bonus Quotation for online readers

I couldn't quite work this into the sermon, but I really like the quotation, so here it is as an extra bonus:

“A person will worship something—have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts—but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.” -- Ralph Waldo Emerson