

JUNE 28, 2020 4TH SUNDAY AFTER PENECCOST YEAR A

OPENING PRAYER

Lord, I will trust you, help me to journey beyond the familiar and into the unknown. Give me faith to leave old ways and break fresh ground with you. Christ of the mysteries, can I trust you to be stronger than each storm within me? I believe you will make a way for me and provide for me if I only trust you. Amen. (1)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Psalms 13:1-4

1How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? 3Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, 4and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Psalms 13:5-6

5But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. 6I will sing to the Lord because he has dealt bountifully with me. Believe in the Good News of the Gospel, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

Terrifying Word, life-giving Word, sanctifying Word, come to us as ones who crave water in the desert. Grant that we may hear and respond to you, yes, in fear and trembling, and also in rejoicing, through the Lamb that was slaughtered, Jesus Christ, who, with you and the Holy Spirit, is worshiped and glorified by all your saints, now and forever. Amen.

Genesis 22:1-14

22After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2He 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."

3So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young 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. 4On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 5Then 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." 6Abraham 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. 7Isaac 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?” 8Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together. 9When 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 wood. 10Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

11But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 12He 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.” 13And 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. 14So Abraham called that place “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

SERMON

“God tests Abraham”

When we last saw Abraham, he was standing at the door of the desert watching his son Ishmael and his mother Hagar walk into exile ... Ishmael wouldn't meet his eyes when he was saying good bye; never even looked back as he and his mother entered the desert. Who could blame him? Abraham had asked God more than

once, "Does it have to be this way?"... "Don't you know how much I love that boy?" ... but God was silent. So, Abraham obeyed... Abraham stood there for a long time, long after the two had disappeared on the horizon.... motionless...

And that brings us right up to today, because our text starts out by saying "after all these things..." I don't remember where I read it- and perhaps I have the exact quote wrong, but the author said something like- "After all these things... is such an interesting phrase. Like when you are in the middle of a book, and a chapter has ended, but before you move on you take a deep breath... and maybe make yourself a cup of tea, and you stare out a window and think and reflect and even savor the richness of what's happened so far. And you know that everything that has happened up till now has been leading up to something else... something more... something bigger... and maybe better... after these things..."
(source unknown)

Let's keep reading... After all these things, God tested Abraham... OUCH! You mean, the last chapter was not a test? Are you kidding?

But at least we know right from the beginning that what is going to happen to Abraham next is a set up - a test.

Now, before we get into what the test is... we may need to take a step back... because we hear a lot about “God testing us.” And sometimes we think of that word, especially when it comes to God, with a negative implication. Like, God tests us to see if we will be faithful through the suffering... or almost sadistically to see how much we love God. But that's not what we're seeing here.

A test, just like the ones you take in school, is meant to monitor progress- to see how much we have learned, and to assess whether or not we are ready to go on to the next step of learning. For example, if we take a math test, and discover that every time we did a problem with division we got it wrong, it lets us know that we need to work on our division... and we need to go back and work on it before we can start learning algebra. Algebra for me was something I never understood. But it helps us identify our readiness for what will come next...

For Abraham, the test is meant to assess if he is ready to step into the meaning of his new God given name. Remember that Abraham, means "Father of the Multitudes," as opposed to Abram “Lofty Father, or Father of the heavens”. Is he ready, after all he has learned, to get his head out of the clouds and look toward the needs of the people... ‘the father of the multitudes’?

And so, after all these things, years after he has said good-bye to Ishmael, when he felt sure the promise of his line would be carried on through Isaac, and all is right with the world again.

But once again, the voice of God interrupts:

“Abraham! ...Abraham!” And Abraham says, “Here I am!”

God: “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.”

Abraham doesn't ask for God to repeat the request... he just stands there stunned, “This is a joke, right? Because God wouldn't ask me to do this... it's crazy...everything that has happened... the covenant... the promise... the fulfillment through Isaac... God would ask me to destroy all of that...to sacrifice my own son?"

Abraham- maybe half in shock, maybe just plain resigned that he was going to do whatever God told him from now on, he doesn't argue, nor does he resist.

They get a couple of servants, and a donkey, and some wood, and they head out into the mountains. Now, remember what we have learned about Abraham- we have seen him build altars since day one and by this time, Isaac must have witnessed his father making sacrifices on a regular basis.

As they reach the bottom of the mountain, Abraham tells the servants to wait, and he takes the wood from the donkey and gives it to Isaac to carry and the two of them start up the mountain by themselves. There is no breeze as they climb and the air is heavy and thick, the act he is about to commit has Abraham's head spinning. He looks down at the knife he is carrying, he feels it try to slip from his sweat soaked hand. As he walks, he nervously begins cleaning his nails with the tip as he tries to work this through... 'This is ridiculous! What is God thinking? Good God, what am I thinking? Lord, you know I'll do whatever you want, but please help me to understand that this is what you are really asking me to do. It doesn't make sense. How can things happen the way you told me they would if you are asking me to destroy Isaac? He's your promised one! What about the covenant, are all bets off now?

And then, a voice... not from God, but from his son who is all of a sudden, trailing behind, "I think we forgot something. We have wood, and everything but where's the lamb for the burnt offering? What are we going to use for a sacrifice?"

And Abraham sort of hears himself mumble something about was God providing the lamb or something, but all the conversation and action that took place next was a blur for Abraham. The next time he has a conscious moment he realizes that he is standing over his son, who he has somehow managed to tie up and who now lay's

shivering on the very wood he carried up the hill on the top of a an altar.

How did it happen? What was his reaction when Isaac realized that HE was the burnt offering? Had he resisted? Did he try to run? Did he plead with his father not to do this, did he cry, or struggle? or did he just do what his father asked him to do? Was he submissive to the one he trusted with his very life?

Abraham doesn't even remember. All he can see now are Isaac's eyes. The eyes that since the day of his birth had captured the essence of his name, laughter. The eyes that had welcomed him at the door the day he had sent Ishmael away. The eyes that held the promise of an heir of a nation, the promise of God. His eyes now filled with terror and trust all at once, and they pierce Abraham to his core.

Abraham notices that tears from his own eyes are falling on to his son's bare chest, he is sobbing. With one trembling hand he covers Isaac's eyes, and with the other he takes hold of the knife and as he slowly lifts the blade, he whispers one final prayer, 'God help me'

"Abraham, Abraham!" Abraham blinks... "God?"

“Abraham... don’t do it... don’t touch him; for now, I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

Abraham, still bent over the altar, looks at the knife inches from his son’s throat in his still shaking hand. He tosses the tool as far away from his son as he can, and begins to try to untie Isaac- now motionless from shock... He grabs the boy’s body from the altar and kneels next to him on the ground, crying aloud and thanking God for sparing his life. He sees a ram in a bush nearby, caught by its horns, and Abe uses it for the sacrifice, and he worships the Lord and God affirms that everything that God has said will happen through Abraham will indeed happen.

We need to stop here for a minute. Because probably, many of you are more than a bit horrified by this whole story- as well you should be. We have no concept of what it means to participate in such an act- we can't relate to any sort of religion that would demand child sacrifice- but this was the world that Abraham lived in. The gods people worshiped in the region demanded all kinds of offerings from their worshipers, including blood sacrifice... and in essence, God was stopping this practice by saying, no more....no more children will die!

And that's fine. But truthfully, I'm not sure I want to have a relationship with God who would ask me to do the unspeakable, to do something that I find as repulsive as sacrificing my child.

That's not to say that we don't sacrifice our children to various gods every day- depending on what is taught in our home. Our Gods... the things we deem important, our priorities, become the Gods our children are offered up to. Whether it is the God of money, or power, or envy, or competition or consumerism, or violence or prejudice. I'm going to leave that for you to ponder on your own.

But the Abraham story isn't so much a story about a man sacrificing his child, as it is about a man risking everything for his belief in God. Abraham had been given a promise that God would make him the father of the multitudes- that many nations would be born through him- that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and grains of sand on the seashore, and God promised that it would happen through Isaac. For Abraham, Isaac represented covenant, a promise that Isaac was the physical marker of God's plan. Something he could return to daily, a visible sign of the things to come. Isaac represented for Abraham, the surety and security of all he was.

So what the sacrifice really came down to was the question of whether or not Abraham believed God was big enough to carry out the plan. Even if Abraham destroyed the promise, the physical sign of the covenant. This was the test! God tested Abraham in asking him to sacrifice Isaac: by doing so, Abraham would be potentially throwing away all that God had promised. And the moment Abraham showed that he trusted God to carry out the plan, without having the physical signs right in front of him, he passed the test. Abraham was now ready to go on to the next step- he could be ‘father of the multitudes’ because he understood that everything he had, everything that he would ever have or would ever be promised to have, was ultimately a gift from God. It didn’t belong to him. Isaac, the covenant, the promise, the future, didn’t belong to him. It all belonged to God.

We tend to hold closest the things that are most dear to us. We clutch our own Isaacs, the things that we think will bring us security and comfort and assurance in our lives- we see them as physical signs that we are protected and will be provided for. We even thank God for blessing us with so much. But then we grip the things we have so tightly that they end up bound on our altar of choice, and our hands tremble when we think about giving any of it away. I’m not talking about just money here. I’m talking about all our gifts- whatever God has given us... teaching, caring, listening to someone,

servicing, leading, we tend to hold our church that way too. But what we don't realize, none of it belongs to us, including our church, it all belongs to God!

So, we're left with this question. What is it that God has given us as a sign of promise, of future, of security that we don't want to part with? Things near and dear to our hearts are the most difficult to trust God with, and many times in order to give those things, we have to give up some of ourselves. Whether its money, or time or even tradition, the way we've always done things, that's a tough one, right?

But that's what this test is about. We have to be willing to give up part of who we think we are and step into who God tells us we are and to do that we have to believe that God is bigger than what we can see that God is able to do more than we can ask or think. Is our God that big?

And after all these things, maybe, just maybe, this afternoon you might think and reflect and even savor the richness of what's happened up till now. Reflect on this, that from that time to the present and forever, God's spirit lives in you. It's the spirit whose voice you hear deep inside, this is a test: Is our God that big?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator of all things seen and unseen, you blew the Spirit of Christ into apostles and disciples enslaved by sin, freeing your people from death and captivating us with your steadfast love. You raised the body of Christ, the church in the world, to proclaim the good news of salvation. For the sake of the world we pray, Come, Lord Jesus!

We pray for all whom you call into the work of the church. May they know the presence of your Spirit to strengthen, guide, correct, comfort, and challenge.

We pray for all whose lives are touched by the church's witness. May they feel the healing hands of Christ Jesus serving them with gentleness, kindness, grace, and love.

We pray for the world into which you call the church. Help us to be faithful in giving ourselves away for the sake of the gospel. In your Spirit, let us show the peace of Christ to a world of violence, share the bread of heaven with a world of hunger, offer springs of living water to a world of pollution, and lead the way of truth and life with the gifts of faith, hope, and love until you bring the fullness of your new creation. Then and now we rejoice with the multitudes: praise, honor, and glory to you, Holy Trinity, in the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ who taught us to pray...(Lord's Prayer)

BENEDICTION

Matthew 10:40-42

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

1. The Northumbria Community (Horizons May/June 2020)