

The Second Sunday in Lent, Year B, 2009

The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Among the Old Testament stories of Abraham is a remarkable narrative about Israel's patriarch and his first-born son, Isaac. Many of us know little about the Old Testament and that is too bad, because you really cannot understand the New Testament and Jesus unless you have a good working knowledge of ancient Israel and the Hebrew faith, faith recorded in the stories of the Old Testament. In our Old Testament reading this morning, we are told of God's covenant with Abraham – that God would bless Abraham and Sarah, his wife, by giving them a son in their old age. Throughout their marriage, Sarah had been barren. Now God promised that by Abraham and Sarah, through their son to be, Isaac, God would build himself a nation. That nation would be a nation of God's chosen people, and the covenant with Abraham would bind that nation to God for eternity. Isaac was Abraham's only son, at least from the perspective of the ancient Jews. Oh, to be absolutely factual, Abraham did have another son, by the slave of his wife, a woman named Hagar. But a child by one's slave didn't count, by Hebrew consideration and, by their projection, God's consideration either. This is important for us to understand, because ancient Israel considered Isaac as Abraham's only son, and the Church points to Abraham's love for Isaac as like God the Father's love for Jesus, his only Son. And as it was through Isaac that God fulfilled his covenant with ancient Israel, it is through Jesus that God makes and fulfills his covenant with his Holy Church, the body of baptized believers in Jesus Christ.

Now, you may think I am belaboring this point, but it is crucial to really understanding Jesus and what his sacrifice was all about. What you may not know, unless you know the Old Testament stories, is that when Isaac was just a little kid God told Abraham to take Isaac, climb a sacred mountain, and offer Isaac as a burnt offering to Almighty God. God wanted to test Abraham. He wanted Abraham to prove his worth. And so Abraham went up the mountain fully intending to slaughter Isaac because Abraham trusted God and had faith in God, even when he lacked understanding. Because of Abraham's faith and trust, God intervened and provided a ram in place of Isaac and Abraham's only son did not have to die. I told you that this points to Jesus. How can this be? The Genesis account of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac foreshadows, theologically, God the Father's offering of his Jesus. Given our values, this does not make sense. When you love someone, you want to protect him or her from harm. You don't want to kill that person. So, to understand these stories, we have to back away from our natural recoil. We have to understand these stories as testaments to faith.

We have limited understanding of these things. On the surface they fly in the face of what we think we know about God. Jesus taught us that God's love is consistent and merciful. God showers us with good things, not bad and painful things. Above all, God values life. God gave us a commandment that we should not murder. These things that we believe about God give us a

cognitive handles that help us understand God. With these things, we try to make sense of God. But in this, we are limited, and we do well to remember, from the Book of Job, that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts. When something extraordinary, something outside our window of understanding occurs, the question for us is whether our faith is sufficient to trust God. In other words, do we trust God to be consistent in love? The story of Abraham and Isaac tells us that Abraham did trust God, and God kept the promise to Abraham and his people.

Now, we turn to our gospel reading and the introduction of a theme that is the very foundation of Christian understanding and our experience of God. It also flies in the face of all that we believe to be good and righteous. It is God the Father's sanction of our Lord's offering of himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Our Lord's crucifixion is known to the church as the Atonement – an offering to appease God and offset human sin, and it is through that offering that we believe that salvation is possible. In the gospel reading, Jesus introduced his disciples, his closest friends, to the reality that he was going to die as a sacrifice to Almighty God – a sacrifice necessitated by human sin. And Jesus took this even further. He told them that to be a follower of his one had to be willing to take up the cross and follow, that discipleship without sacrifice and suffering is an impossibility. Our willingness to put the service of God before any self-consideration is what Christian sacrifice is all about. We have to be willing to take up the Cross of Jesus Christ and follow our Lord if we are going to share in his Resurrection. Our baptism is into the death as well as the Resurrection of our Lord. And Christian sacrifice is a central theme of Lent. It is also central to Christian understanding. Saint Peter didn't like hearing this and chose to argue with Jesus. He earned the rebuke, "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus said, unequivocally, that if we want to consider ourselves Christians we have to be willing to take up the Cross by making his Cross our cross, regardless of personal cost. "For those who want to save their life," Jesus said, "will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Lent reminds us that we are asked to share the faith of Abraham, who trusted God without condition. We are asked to strive for the faith of Jesus, who lovingly embraced the agony of the Cross, with unquestioned confidence in the assurance of the Father's love. This is the faith, Jesus tells us, that can move mountains. This is the faith that lets us go forward in the dark moments of life. This is the faith that sustains us, and propels us to in our quest to truly know Jesus as Lord, and this is the faith that gives us the courage to give our all to the glory of God and the service of Jesus Christ. With faith such as this, we experience the grace of God that gives us our salvation. *Amen.*

