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Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost | 2 July 2023

Year A Proper 8: Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer.

This Sunday is a little different. Rather than our usual Eucharistic service, we are gathering for Morning Prayer. Morning Prayer is a highly adaptable rite. It can be undertaken alone or with others, it can be led by an ordained minister or a lay minister like you and me. It can expand to hold a great deal of scripture and song, or it can be brief—a spiritual practice to accompany the morning's first cup of coffee. It needn't include a homily, but given that our readings for today include the binding of Issac it seems to me that we ought to pause and allow ourselves a moment to grapple with this difficult text.

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Let's start with the structure of sacrifice.

We live in a spiritual and moral landscape of competing goods. There is the good of spending time with my children, and the good of earning money to support my family, the good of worshiping my God, the good of calling my representatives, the good of eating more vegetables, the good of learning how to say no . . . the list goes on and on.

Sacrifice is how we organize these goods, how we express our hierarchy of values. We say, 'As good as this book is, I'm going to set it aside for the evening so I can be present to my partner,' 'As good as a decade of fun and exploration would be, I'm going to enroll in med school, 'As good as peaceful fellowship is, I'm going to follow my conscience and speak my mind.'. In civilizations all over the ancient world our ancestors said, 'As good as the life of this animal is—or in some cases as good as the life of this person is—the good of honoring our gods and securing our future as a people must take priority.'

To riff on Saint Augustine, we fall into sin when we get our priorities wrong, sacrificing higher goods for lesser ones. We do this all the time. Righteousness is that precious and elusive state of having our goods in their proper order.

Now on to our story:

God tests Abraham.

What is the nature of this test? The most common interpretation is that God wants to know if

Abraham is prepared to give back to God the gift that came from God. Will Abraham hold his son with an open hand? Of course it is not merely a matter of holding Isaac with an open hand, but of raising his hand against Isaac. God wants to know if Abraham is prepared to kill his only and beloved son.

In terms of sacrifice: Will Abraham put the good of obeying God above the prohibition against murder, above his duties of protection as a father, above his hope that through Isaac he would have descendents as numerous as the stars?

Many faithful commentators believe that Abraham passes this test. Some believe he passes it inwardly, existentially: In his readiness to lose his son, Abraham demonstrates that he is properly detached; his detachment consummates the sacrifice, and renders actual killing superfluous. Other commentators focus on Abraham's external actions: See how he saddles his donkey, cuts the wood, and sets out in earnest.

There are a few faithful commentators who interpret the nature of the test otherwise. In their view, God is not testing Abraham's blind obedience, but rather his knowledge of God's nature; this is a test of Abraham's understanding and moral courage. Abraham has been hearing God's voice for a long time now, how well does he understand who God is? Does he appreciate just how different God is from the pagan gods of the surrounding peoples? Does he understand that for this God the life of a single person is of ultimate value, and the prohibition against murder carries ultimate authority? On this reading Abraham initially fails the test. He should have had the chutzpah to say no.

It's an attractive reading, but it's hard to square with God's approving language in the end, "for I now know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son from me."

Hm. There's a third interpretation worth mentioning. This is that Abrham neither passes or fails the test, but rather turns the tables on God and tests him in kind. God tests Abraham with the command to kill his son, and Abraham tests God by calling his bluff, forcing him to reveal his true nature: Is he in fact the sort of God who would let Abraham go through with it?

To our great relief, the answer is no.

We find some support for this interpretation in Abraham's parting words to the two servants. He says, "Stay here . . . we will worship and then we—Isaac and I—will come back to you." What does Abraham know, or what is he hoping for?

Now one of the difficulties with this interpretation is that Abraham then appears willing to terrify

Isaac and betray his son's trust, going so far as to bind him, lay him on the pyre, and raise the knife over him is this defiant game of chicken with God.

No easy answers.

What is most striking to me in this story, and what I hope we will take with us is that, whether in a state of obedience or defiance, Abraham manages to remain interruptible. He hears others and responds.

Initially God calls him by name. "Here I am," he says.

On their way up the mountain, his son queries him about the absent lamb. We can only imagine how preoccupied Abraham must have been—steeling himself to do God's will, or spinning out on the question of whether and how God would intervene—but again he says, "Here I am," and answers his son in a way that is both honest and mercifully equivocal: "The Lord will provide."

Most astonishingly, in that moment where Abraham grips the knife, his face flushed, the blood pounding in his ears, his son's terror and his own terror mirroring and amplifying one another, a din of absurdity and despair threatening to overwhelm his senses, Abraham hears the voice of an angel, "Abraham, Abraham." He stops: "Here I am," "Do not lay your hand on the boy." Abraham hears that disruptive voice, which is *not* the voice of God, but which he recognizes as carrying the authority of God. He drops the knife.

This is extraordinary. Abrham has come so far in asserting this particular hierarchy of values, this particular way of ordering the competing goods of his life. He is horrifically resolute, yet he retains his ability to relent. Interruptible, responsive, he answers, and is available for the work of reassessment.

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We are engaged in sacrifice all the time. We empty our bank account to pay for a plane ticket so we can attend a funeral. We miss brunch with friends or a morning jog to be here now offering our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. As we celebrate Independence Day we remember the many millions of people who, in ways large and small, have sacrificed personal goods—life, limb, safety, simplicity—for the shared good of a more perfect union.

Just as that phrase—a more perfect union—suggests, the work of getting our values in the right order, of discerning what ought to be sacrificed for what, is never done. We can and must remain interruptible, responsive, available for the work of reassessment.

Perhaps this is where our Gospel reading can help us. It is tempting to hear Jesus' words to the disciples as though they are addressed to us: When people treat me well they honor Christ; and when they treat me poorly they dishonor Christ. I think we would do well to identify not with the disciples, but with those people whom the disciples are going out to meet. The disciples will show up with disruptive news—good news they'll insist—but news that will ask us to radically reorganize our values, to stop prioritizing these things, and start prioritizing other things, to quit sacrificing doves in the temple and start sacrificing our unclean thoughts and desires. Our task is to welcome them as we would welcome Christ. It is to be like Abraham saying "Here I am," ready to hear God's authority in another's voice, ready to discover that we had it all wrong, ready to find the ram in the thicket and to go back down the mountain embracing our son.

Amen.