

Lent 2B Sermon 030809  
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 (22:1-14);  
Psalm 22:22-30;  
Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

In the name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

This is one of those rare times where I think the Revised Common Lectionary compilers really blew it. In the days when Episcopalians used our own lectionary, on the second Sunday of Lent in year B, the Old Testament reading was Genesis 22:1-14. That reading is the story of Abraham going up the mountain to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Not only do I think we do ourselves a disservice if we avoid the difficult story of Abraham and Isaac, but I also believe that that story fits in much better with today's Gospel reading.

In the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis, God 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." And Abraham packed Isaac and the servants up, and off they went. Excuse Me?!? Those of you who are at least as old as me, may remember the old Bill Cosby routine where he talked about what the conversation between God and Noah must have really sounded like. Well, that's the way I think this conversation between God and Abraham might have sounded if I had been in Abraham's shoes. God says, "John?" I answer, "What?" God says, "Take your son, your only son Brian, whom you love and go to the land of Lufkin, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the hills that

I shall show you.” And I would respond, “Riiight.” “You’re kidding me. This is a joke. You don’t really expect me to take my only son and sacrifice him do you?” And God would say, “Yep! Get after it! Go and git ‘er dun!” (You do realize that God speaks with a Texas accent don’t you?)

Anyway, what was God thinking? Why would God do this to Abraham, to Isaac and to Sarah? And how do we reconcile this command with the God we have hopefully witnessed in our own lives? In order to answer these questions you have to look a little farther back, say to the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Genesis..

Remember, earlier in the story, God chose Abraham and called him to be a servant – a “disciple” if you will – of God’s. God told Abraham to leave his home and family and everything he knew in Haran (what is now Iraq) and to walk 1,000 miles to Canaan (now Palestine). In return for Abraham’s trust in and devotion to God, God promised that Abraham would receive wealth in the form of a grant of land that flowed with milk and honey, a land of abundance of every sort, and Abraham would become the father of a nation and would always have God with him to guide and lead him through life. So Abraham left everything that was familiar and went toward Canaan. God had blessed Abraham already with Sarah, his beautiful and faithful wife. Together, they prospered and became quite wealthy, just as God had promised.

Abraham was faithful to God and God was faithful to Abraham. But throughout all the years, Abraham and Sarah never had the children that God promised, until they were old and God blessed them with Isaac – the only child they had together. Imagine what that must have been like. They were old and had waited patiently all their lives for a child. Now they had a son whom they could not possibly have loved any more. In fact, they loved Isaac so much that you could say that he became the center of their universe, just as it is with almost all new parents.

So one day God called Abraham and said, in essence, “Abraham, remember the covenant we made – that you would be my servant, my disciple and I would be your God? Well, it seems that you might not be living up to your part any more. You are now worshipping your only son. I want you take Isaac and go sacrifice him because I am the only God in the world.” And Abraham, who WAS always faithful to the covenant, said, “Here I am, Lord,” and off he went, to do as God had commanded. You see, Abraham was faithful to God AND he had the ultimate trust in God. This was NOT the same as if God called me today and told me to go and sacrifice Brian. God and I do not have the same history nor the same relationship that God and Abraham had.

God has asked me to do hard things in my life too. Nothing like what He asked of Abraham, but hard nonetheless. My fourteen year path to ordination was

hard. It was hard to decide to step out in faith and follow God's call, not knowing where it might lead. And if I had known then that the road to ordination would take as long as it did and would have the incredible number of twists, turns, false starts and stops, I might not have agreed so readily. But I did agree and over the all those years, Donna, Shannon, Brian and I learned about the high cost of discipleship. Sold houses, moves – once moving in with my parents – never having the money and prestige that some of my peers had, because I wasn't called to be lawyer, I was called to be a priest and therefore I couldn't be as successful in the practice of law as some others we knew who were more dedicated to it.

In order to be God's disciple, one has to be willing to give it ALL up – to risk losing everything that is important in life – in order to faithfully follow where God is leading. That is hard stuff for people in 21<sup>st</sup> century America to really grasp. We are the country that has spawned any number of “Christian” churches that teach the second part of God's covenant with Abraham without teaching the first part. There are so many people in this country today who believe that God will make them successful, happy and wealthy if only they believe and “claim the blessings of God.” What they never talk about is the cost of discipleship. In order to be faithful enough to claim the blessings of God, we have to first be willing to throw it all away.

Jesus told the crowd, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” I guarantee you that this is a verse from the Gospel that doesn’t come up very often in many of these modern-day churches. Jesus understood the cost of discipleship. The entire second half of Mark’s Gospel is devoted to Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. It is clear from the way the account is written that Jesus knew where He was going – and why – as He made His way through the countryside, walking toward His own impending death. Over days, weeks, maybe even months, He made his way ever closer to the time when he would have to confront death face-to-face and make His own decision about faith, trust and discipleship. And Mark’s first readers would have understood the discipleship call as well. This Gospel was written during the time of the persecution of Christians by the Emperor, Nero. Christians were being crucified every day, simply for being identified as Christians and refusing to deny their belief in the risen Lord. Just as Jesus went to the cross trusting in the grace and mercy of God, so too did the early Christians. They quite literally picked up their crosses and followed Jesus. They lost their lives for His sake and for the sake of His Gospel – and therein found their lives.

Faith, trust and discipleship – they all go together as pieces of a single puzzle. It is faith in God’s love for us and in God’s continually sticking to the covenant between humanity and God that allows us to trust God enough to step out and live the hard lives of disciples. Discipleship is not cheap, but it is imminently worth the cost. Jesus lived His entire earthly life as if the only thing that mattered, the only thing that He had of any value, was His faith and belief in the Father, because, in fact, that is the most valuable possession any of us has. If we lose that, we lose our eternal lives, not just this short life on earth, and that is losing everything.

Abraham took Isaac up to the mountain and obediently bound him and laid him on the altar he had built. As Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac, we get the boy’s only line in this drama. He says, “we have the fire, the wood and the knife, but where is the lamb for the sacrifice?” Abraham says, “God will provide,” and indeed He did. Two thousand years ago, on that same mountain, Jesus went up to the cross and became the paschal lamb, the sacrifice for all humanity’s salvation. God demanded a high price from Abraham in a show of faith, but not a price that God, the Father of ALL was not willing to pay Himself. God gave HIS only son to be sacrificed for us, Abraham only had to OFFER his son for sacrifice.

Faith, trust and discipleship. Abraham and Jesus. They’re all pieces of the same puzzle, the puzzle of our relationship with God. Don’t be afraid. Go out and

pick up that cross. Have faith. Trust in God. God will provide. And you will gain your life not by literally losing it, but by OFFERING it up for God to take.

Amen.