

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
March 04, 2012  
Second Sunday in Lent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 22:1-14  
Psalm 16:5-11  
Romans 8:31-39  
Mark 8:31-38

Our Scripture lessons today are so rich in meaning -- both in terms of their content and the way they are paired together -- that to preach on them is perhaps to do them a disservice and rob them of their power.

If we are not careful, the public reading of the Scriptures in our midst each week can become routine, a regular part of the service that can become habitual to the point of dulling our senses and preventing us from truly hearing the Word of God. All worship -- including liturgical worship -- can become routine and cold if not constantly experienced with warm and faithful hearts, and lives determined to obey.

One of the effects of the Lenten season is that the texts we encounter confront us forcefully with the radical nature of God's call upon our lives. Such is the case today, especially with our Old Testament and Gospel lessons.

The parallels between these two texts are striking. Both texts call for a radical step of faith and obedience, and in doing so help us to experience more clearly what faith -- biblical faith -- is all about.

Let's begin with the story of Abraham and Isaac, with what the writer describes as a "test" of Abraham's faith.

You recall that earlier in Genesis, God calls Abraham and promises him that he will have a family, that his descendants will become great, that they will occupy their own land and become a blessing to all peoples of the earth (cf. Gen. 12:1-3ff.).

A few chapters later, Abraham and Sarah become parents in their old age, and Isaac, the promised son, is born. Isaac, then, becomes the important first step in the fulfillment of God's grand scheme, the critical component in God's promise to Abraham. It is no understatement to say that *everything is riding on Isaac*.

What a shock it must be then when God comes to Abraham and says, "I want you to take your only son, the one you love, up to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there to me."

I find it compelling that very early in the Bible, the question "what is faith?" is not answered with theological statements, a set of propositions, or even with admonitions to be faithful, but with a *story*. A story of a man who trusted in God even when God appeared to be acting against His promise. The faith that Abraham shows -- biblical faith -- involves great risk, not in the sense of accepting certain beliefs, but the risk that comes from taking concrete action.

For it is easy to obey God and believe God in matters that do not test us or require much of us. It is easy to trust God when there is little sacrifice required on our part.

But how do we respond when God asks something difficult, perhaps impossible, from us? For example, how do we respond when we hear these words: "If any of you would be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me?"

What makes Abraham's sacrifice remarkable is that he is asked to give up that which is dearest to him -- his beloved son. This passage is one of the first instances in the Bible where the word "love" is used, and it is used with respect to a father's great love for his son.

How could Abraham do this? How could Abraham honor this request from God that seemed to make no sense?

What troubles me about this story is that because of the emotional response it produces in me, I want to know Abraham's emotional state. I want the text to put Abraham on the Psychiatrist's couch, to analyze Abraham and let me peek deep into his soul and to see the raging conflict that surely must be happening there.

But the text doesn't do that. We are not told in this story how Abraham *feels*. We are only told how he *acts* and what he *does*. We are only told how he directs the course of his life.

The takeaway for us here might be this: biblical faith is less about how we *feel*, and more about what we *do*. The greatest tests of your faith will not center around your feelings, but on your choice to take action and to move your life in a certain direction. *Will you trust God in the face of great risk? Will you take action when your feelings argue against it? Will you obey God when the going gets tough?*

What gave Abraham the strength to obey God and to trust God in this situation? St. Augustine may have the partial answer. Augustine said, “what seems hard, love makes easy.”

There is no question that Abraham loved Isaac. Isaac is his beloved son. But what enables Abraham to follow through in this story is that he loves God even more. And what seems hard, love makes easy. The impossible becomes possible in the face of overwhelming love.

Which leads us to our Gospel lesson, and Jesus’ radical invitation to us. Here we face the same issues that Abraham faced. For it might be easy for us to follow Jesus as he heals and performs mighty miracles. It might be easy to follow Jesus as he performs exorcisms and amasses great crowds and teaches with authority. It might be easy to stand by his side as he puts all hostile forces in their place.

But what do we do when he calls on us to follow him to Jerusalem, to accompany him to his death -- and subsequently our own?

It is easy to believe in Jesus when nothing is required of us, when there is little or no sacrifice on our part. But what happens when you are asked to surrender your claim upon your own life? What happens when you are invited to put God's agenda ahead of your own, to follow a path you would not choose if you were doing the choosing?

What could possibly enable us to respond here to Jesus' call and to actually do it? Like Abraham, where can we find strength for this kind of radical obedience?

I can't answer that for you. I can tell you this: what seems hard, love makes easy. Only this time it isn't so much our love for God, *but God's love for us*, that enables us to hear and answer Jesus' call.

Mark's Gospel has been introducing us for weeks to the Father's beloved Son, the One whom the Father loves and with whom he is well pleased. And this beloved Son now prepares to go to Jerusalem, to a mountain outside the city where a torturous act of child sacrifice will occur. Or, in the words of the apostle Paul: "He spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all."

What could cause God to do such a thing? When I consider my life, my sins, my rebellion, all the ways I have hurt God and others and myself -- what would prompt God not to spare his own Son, but to deliver him up for me?

Only one answer comes to me. That which is hard, love makes easy. *God the Father loved his beloved Son; he loved us even more.* And that which was hard became possible in the face of great love.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning with Jesus' radical invitation to take up our cross ringing in our ears, let us come with the full awareness that what seems hard *love* makes easy. God's great love to us is beyond measure, and it is that great love which makes our response to Jesus' call possible. As such, we are reminded that Lent is less about what we are doing for God, and more about what God is doing *for* us, and *in* us.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.