

## Lectionary 13 + June 28, 2020

*Pastor Bryon Hansen*

When scripture is read in worship every week, we usually find a theme between the first reading and the Gospel reading. In fact, the readings from the Old Testament are chosen to reflect the Gospel reading. But during these weeks of Ordinary Time, we have the option of having our first lesson be a semi-continuous reading through the great stories from the Old Testament. Pastor Van Kley and I chose to take that option this summer. More than once, we heard from many of you the need for a primer or a refresher on our sacred story. So, we are taking a journey through Genesis, the very first book in the Bible.

It's the story of Sarah and Abraham and their descendants, chosen by God to be a blessing to all nations.

As we journey through these stories within the story, hearing them read in worship each week, I encourage you to read through also on our own, including the ones that are not read for public worship. You may want to take these weeks as an opportunity to sit down with Genesis and read it straight through.

What we discover is a great story and what we discover is that like all good stories, the story of God's people is filled with high drama. It is not unlike the drama of a novel or a film or your favorite TV soap opera. God's people are real people involved in the day-to-day complexities of life and relationships. Abraham and Sarah and their offspring are people with great virtues and great flaws. Their tale is filled with triumph and tragedy and joy and sorrow. In their relationship to God, they are both faithful and fickle with astonishing moments of fidelity to God and moments of profound disloyalty,

Already, we've seen unflattering portrayals of our forebears. Twice, Abraham, acting out of fear tries to pass his wife Sarah off as his sister. After the birth of Isaac, Sarah demands that Hagar and her son Ishmael, Abraham's other son, be cast out. As we continue through the story we will encounter more of this behavior, revealing a picture of people, not unlike you and me, filled with contradictions and surprises.

We also discover that the main character in the story is someone who surprises us. The main character being God.

Yes, God confounds us and surprises us. If we're looking for a reasonable and predictable God, one whom we can figure out or one with whom we can rest easy, we'll surely be disappointed.

Today's reading is a case in point.

I'll be entirely honest with you. I don't care for this story. It is disturbing on many levels and out of sync with the God we know. What kind of a God is this who would command Abraham to sacrifice his son? We're told God does this to test him. Still, it is a cruel test for both Abraham and Isaac.

The story begins with God commanding sacrifice and at the end making provision for Abraham and rewarding faithfulness. Luther, for one, struggled with this story. He wondered why God, who promised life and blessing through Isaac command Abraham to end his son's life.

Yet, as disturbing as it is, it is a story that has been cherished by rabbis for centuries and one deemed special and important by Jews and Christians alike.

It is one of the stories that may be read at the great Easter Vigil service on Easter Eve. You may recall the last time it was used at the Easter Vigil here a few years ago. Rabbi Daniel Weiner from Temple De Hirsh Sinai graciously received the invitation to be with us to proclaim the story in Hebrew and then provide rich commentary.

My earliest recollection of using this story as one of the Easter Vigil stories was several years before that when I served a congregation on the Oregon Coast. When it came time to decide who should be asked to read the lessons, someone in the planning group had a very strong recommendation of who should read this story. She suggested a fellow in the parish who pretty much everyone agreed was a righteous man, someone who demonstrated rich obedience to God. When she suggested his name, she said, "I could see him doing that!" We asked, "doing what?" She said, "doing what God asked Abraham to do in this story." I did a double take until she explained herself. She said, "I don't think, for one minute, God would ever ask any of us to sacrifice our children like this, but I think there's a deeper meaning to this story. It's about radical obedience to God. Take the sacrifice as a metaphor. It's not a metaphor we necessarily like but it does say God expects everything from us. God command radical obedience."

I am still grateful for this sister in Christ who opened my mind to a deeper interpretation of this text. Instead of taking this particular story literally, I think it functions more like a parable. Jesus used parables. He told them to help people dive deeper into the mystery of God and God's kingdom. I wonder if this text doesn't function that way. As a parable it contains not just one but a multitude of meanings, opening up for us a reflection on the nature of faith and the nature of God.

What might this story say about God?

Here's a parable that shows us a God who is both a promise giver and one who commands trust and obedience.

Through the birth of Isaac, God promises rich blessing and throughout the story, God commands fidelity and trust. This parable, filled with high drama, shows us God the promise giver and provider one who commands our utmost loyalty and trust.

And if we do find God acting in contradictory or surprising or uneven ways, we might do well to hold these things together as a kind of rich paradox of the God whom we cannot contain or control.

When we focus on God the promise giver alone who saves us and loves us and blesses us, we run the risk of basking only in the sunshine of grace. When we focus only on God's commands, we run the risk of legalism, imagining only a "law and order" God. Either way we are not free. In one scenario we are cut off from our neighbor and love may be stifled from the other.

Someone once described the components of God's covenant relationship with the people of God this way:

- I am your God
- You are my people
- I love you
- I am faithful to you
- I will never abandon you

Do you see who bears the weight in this covenant relationship?

In spite of our fickle trust, God will never forsake us and I think this rich promise colors the way we respond to God's commands.

This parable of Abraham and Isaac opens up a host of meanings for me, this time around, I'm struck with the God who is both promise keeper and giver of commands.

Where do you see God at work these days and what kind of response is God provoking from you? Or, put it this way: where is the Spirit prodding and poking us or prodding and poking you?

There have been days lately, where I've wondered if our nation is on the cusp of sea change. Maybe "racial tension" is too polite a phrase. What has been exposed on a grander scale these past weeks is deep and systemic racism and it is as if we are sitting up and taking notice seeking deep change within ourselves and our institutions.

What is the unique witness of the church in the midst of it all? What is God demanding from us? And how do we live in the light of God's promises?

Begin by asking yourself. God demands total obedience, where is my response to God tepid or where am I turning a deaf ear? What will my new obedience look like? I'm pretty sure, for example, that I refrain from racist comments and overtures, but I also believe the Spirit is calling me to something more proactive, maybe to call out micro-aggressions when I see them instead of turning the other way or being more attentive to their presence. It's a place to begin.

So, begin by asking what it is that God is commanding from you.

It is also important for us to explore these questions together as church. It is incumbent upon the church to name racism for what it is. Racism is sin and as Christians we confess that we have participated and continue to participate in systems like these that defy God. We must also ask God to give us the courage to speak truth to power and to practice justice and to bear mercy toward both the oppressed and the oppressor.

We do all these things holding to the promise that God will never forsake us and is with us.

When Jesus sent the twelve apostles on their mission to cast out demons, proclaim good news, heal the sick, raise the dead, and be generous toward all people he warned them it would not be easy. They would be persecuted just for bearing witness in word and deed to God's kingdom. As we heard last week, Jesus' mere presence and practice of grace bring division to the earth.

To follow this Jesus, to live in radical obedience to this God is no easy cake walk but the call to trust him and isn't merely a law. God's call is embedded in God's promises.

Jesus sends the apostles also with this rich promise: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

The work and witness we are called to be about, the mission to which God entrusts us, need not overwhelm or frighten us. For just as surely as we face rejection and even persecution, when we are welcomed or received it's not just you and me who are being received. Jesus is being welcomed and received.

The reward of participating in the mission of God is just that - to love our neighbor for the sake and joy of loving them and to seek justice for the sake and joy of seeing justice done. It also works the other way, too. We are free to welcome all people as Christ. Giving or receiving a cup of cold water is in itself is a great reward.

Every service of worship culminates with a sending. In the sending today we will be singing the South African song, "Send Me, Jesus." It asks God to send us into the world as those willing - willing to serve, willing to love, willing to seek justice, willing to be Christ to others and we go forth as those bearing the mark of the cross first traced on our brows in baptism.

We are sent not as free agents but as women and men who have been joined to Christ.

That's not a small reward. It comes to us as gift from the God who command much from us and promises much to us. Amen.