

Homily for March 12, 2006
Second Sunday of Lent (B)

By Father Charles Bowes

Genesis 22:1-2, 9, 10-13
Psalm 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19
Romans 8:31-34
Mark 9:2-10

Along with Abraham, we discover that God is incomprehensible, yet trustworthy.

“Take your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah...you shall offer him as a holocaust...,” says Genesis chapter 22.

This is one of the best-known and also one of the most puzzling stories in Scripture. I could not count how many people have asked me to explain why God would command a father to kill his son. No answer that I have ever given has been satisfactory, either to my questioner or, to be honest, to myself. Harold Beutow, in his work, *All Things Made New*, says the answer lies somewhere in the passionate love of God and the ineffable faith of Abraham.

The event was a precedent-shattering moment when Abraham’s God rejected the practice of human sacrifice. Indeed, that is what many Scripture commentators say is implicit in this story, because there is evidence in the Old Testament that our early ancestors in faith may have practiced human sacrifice.

Be that as it may, the story can be seen as a testimony of Abraham’s faith and trust in God rather than any statement against human sacrifice.

From the very beginning of the story, we are struck by its drama and suspense. What is going to happen? What were the thoughts of this loving father as he contemplated killing his son? Did he have second

thoughts as he was building the altar? What were Isaac’s thoughts? What is omitted in this reading – Isaac’s reaction – actually would have lent much more emotion to the event. Though Isaac might be an innocent victim, he does not actually suffer. Abraham is the one put to the test, and from a human point of view, his response is terrifying. After Abraham took the wood and laid it on Isaac’s shoulder, the boy looked at his father and said: “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust?” To that question Abraham, sad as he was, said simply: “Son, God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust.” He could not bear to tell Isaac the truth.

Reading backward from the Christian Scriptures, we can see that Isaac, an “only son” and lamb of sacrifice, is a prophetic figure of Christ. This fact helps to explain why frescoes of Abraham sacrificing Isaac are found in the Roman catacombs and on the tombs of the early Christians. We remember, too, Eucharistic Prayer I, in which we relate the offering of bread and wine to the offering of Abraham: “Look with favor on these offerings and accept them as you once accepted the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith...”

What value can we find in such a troubling story? What good can come from such disaster and heartache? Might it be that Abraham was asked to choose either the promises of God as they would be fulfilled in Isaac,

or the God who made the promises in the first place? Once again the story itself offers a clue. Abraham is told: "I know how devoted you are to God." Without understanding how the promises will be fulfilled if Isaac is put to death, Abraham still trusts in God. We still might ask: Why should he and why should we trust a God who requires such great sacrifice?

The answer lies in faith – faith in God no matter what...no matter what we thought the promise or the hope. Without really understanding how God would fulfill the promise, Abraham believes in God. Here his faith or trust in God was tested, just as ours is time and time again.

God does not call us away from our dreams into a vacuum. If we are asked to relinquish a possible future, it is only to be offered another possible future, God's future. Our aspirations may be noble, but the possibilities that God offers will outstrip them. Do we trust enough in God to believe this? Abraham was promised an heir; he relinquished his hold on his heir, and he was granted heirs beyond counting. In the Gospel, the disciples committed themselves to Jesus without realizing that he would allow himself to be handed over to death; he overwhelmed them when he was revealed as God's own beloved son.

Such trust may sound good on paper, until we are confronted again with the bleeding wound left in our hearts when loved ones are ripped from our arms, or when dreams for the future are dashed for no apparent reason. Rather than think that God is playing some capricious game, we are summoned by today's readings to a different way of understanding, to the realization that the events of life are offering us a choice: Do we trust in promises as we perceive them, or do we trust in the God who makes promises that we may not comprehend?

While Lent can be rightly considered a time of testing, it is not a testing to see how much we can endure from or for God. Such a perception of God is found nowhere in the Bible. God's testing of us is really our opportunity to make a choice, as did Abraham.

This coming Thursday evening offers us a choice – a choice to trust that in and through our unloving choices, our sins and struggles, God draws near with peace and hope. Our Lenten reconciliation service takes place at St. Matthias Church at 7:00 p.m. Priests from St. Matthias, Our Lady of the Rosary and St. James of the Valley will serve as confessors.

Let us pray...May we never make believing in you too simple, God of surprising challenges. You ask the utmost of our intelligence and of our courage; may we live that faith in you always, and we ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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