

Sermon – Fifth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 8A, with Baptism)

Scripture Texts: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *God desires mercy, not sacrifice. But, we are sometimes called to trust God with that which we cherish most, having faith that God is good and will always provide, meeting us in our places of need and vulnerability.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. “God tested Abraham.”
 - a. Today’s OT passage opens with these stark and challenging words: “God tested Abraham.”
 - i. As a former teacher, I know that there is a weight behind the word “test.”
 - ii. To be tested is to be evaluated, to have your worth called into question. We always hope to pass a test, but to be tested is to face the possibility of failure.
 - iii. Many students struggle with test anxiety, freezing when faced with this pressure and possibility.
 - b. But, the power of this particular story goes far beyond the mere fact that God is testing Abraham, for the form of this test is so severe: Abraham is called to sacrifice his son.
 - i. The text does not try to avoid the horror of this test, but rather emphasizes it! “Take your son...your only son...Isaac...whom you love...”
 - ii. Moreover, the text masterfully builds the tension, describing with unusual detail all of the preparation (rose early in the morning...saddle donkey...took young men...cut the wood...), the travel over three days, the climbing of the mountain, question from Isaac, the building of the altar, the binding of Isaac...and finally the reaching out a hand for the knife.
 - c. To our modern ears, I hope that such a command from God would be unthinkable; but it would not have been so in Abraham’s time.
 - i. Human sacrifice, and even child sacrifice, was a known practice of the time.
 - ii. Even the OT law given to Moses recognizes this reality: the first born son, in particular, was understood as belonging to God, and parents were required to sacrifice an animal to redeem their child.
 - iii. I expect that Abraham is also feeling the weight of the events of the previous chapter, which we looked at last week. In truth, Isaac is not his only son. He had sent his first son, Ishmael (born of the slave girl Hagar) into the wilderness, perhaps to die, so as to protect the claim of Isaac to God’s promise and blessing. I have to imagine that Abraham still feels guilt from that act, and at least part of him sees this test as the bill coming due.
2. God desires mercy, not sacrifice.
 - a. I spent some time with a Jewish commentary this week, and it notes that this is one of the most read, and studied, and wrestled with passages in all of the Hebrew Bible.

- i. It raises questions about faith: is such sacrifice required of those who would follow God? Clearly, God doesn't want us to literally kill our children today, but must we be prepared to give up what we love most to prove ourselves and pass the test?
 - ii. Moreover, who is the God that would demand such a sacrifice? It seems cruel and abusive! Is this really the kind of God that we would worship?
 - b. Must remember where we started a few weeks ago. On the first Sunday of May, when we were first introduced to Abraham and his incredible act of faith in leaving his home and all he knew to follow God, we wrestled with similar questions.
 - i. Thankfully, we had a cheat sheet for that test! The gospel passage paired with that story had a very clear statement from Jesus: God desires mercy rather than sacrifice!
 - ii. Some commentators go so far as to say that we must, like Abraham, be willing to put aside compassion to follow God's command, to pass God's test. But that reading is not one that we can accept if we would follow the Jesus who cares deeply for even the thirsty "little ones" of the world, as we see in today's Gospel.
 - c. More, if you were able to attend Holy Week services, I shared a favorite commentary on this passage – an imaginative engagement with the challenging story (a midrash!).
 - i. Madeline L'Engle, the famous children's author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, tells about one of her students suggesting that the "angel of the LORD" reports back to God after staying Abraham's hand.
 - ii. The angel is jubilant that Abraham passed the test, but then recognizes that God seems disappointed. The angel asks, "Isn't it wonderful that Abraham passed? His faith was so strong that he was willing to give you even his son!?"
 - iii. God responds that Abraham failed the true test by choosing law over love.
 - d. Driven by fear and insecurity, we humans are prone to grand gestures and dramatic displays as we try to prove ourselves, to show ourselves worthy of honor and power.
 - i. So many of us would give anything to get a leg up, to achieve dominance over others.
 - ii. And, this text is a challenge to that attitude, revealing that God values mercy over sacrifice.
 - iii. This text says clearly that sacrifice is not what God seeks, and that we don't have to prove ourselves to God – especially not with sacrifice!
- 3. Our call to trust God with the things we love and cherish above all else
 - a. That God desires mercy, not sacrifice, is (to me, at least) the primary meaning of this test. Still, I was reminded this week, of the wise words of one particularly famous commentator. Gerhard von Rad suggests that we can never boil a story like this down to a single meaning – and that any attempt to do so misses the richness of the text!
 - b. So, in that vein, I wonder if this passage also might carry a call for us to trust God with the things – or the people – that we cherish most.
 - i. There is a difference between trust and sacrifice! To sacrifice is to devalue the things we cherish – to prove ourselves by showing that they do not mean as much to us as what we sacrifice for. In this story, to sacrifice Isaac would be for Abraham to show that he valued obedience to God over his son.
 - ii. But, there is a different way of looking at it. What if Abraham is not devaluing his son, but is trusting God with what he cherishes most?
 - iii. Some Jewish commentators play with such a reading, arguing that the only way that Abraham is able to move forward in this text is by trusting that God would not

- actually demand Isaac's death. We see hints of this when Abraham tells his slaves, we will go up the mountain, "we will worship, and then we will come back to you." We see it also when he tells Isaac that "God himself will provide the lamb..."
- iv. Other Jewish commentators go even further, suggesting that Abraham's faith is shown, not in his willingness to sacrifice, but in his trusting that God will keep God's promise to give Abraham many descendants through Isaac. Abraham trusts, they say, that God is able and willing to raise Isaac from the dead if necessary to fulfill God's promise. As the text emphasizes, "The LORD will provide"!
- c. The painful truth of this broken world is that we cannot always protect the things and people that we love most.
- i. We are finite and limited people, but there are those among us who try to transcend those human limitations – to accrue so much power and privilege that they can control the world and protect the things they choose to protect.
 - ii. The truth is that no amount of power and privilege is ever enough to fully control the circumstances of the world, or to offer perfect protection. And, those who seek such power inevitably do great harm, often committing unspeakable atrocities in their pursuit of security.
 - iii. We who would follow Jesus are called to a different way. The way of the cross recognizes that, in a broken world, sometimes we lose – sometimes we fail – sometimes we face death or must bear the death of the things and people that we cherish most. But, the way of the cross also trusts that our stories never end in that darkness!
 - iv. The God who desires mercy, rather than sacrifice, is trustworthy! God will fulfill God's promises, and is able to bring new life from death. Therefore, we can trust this God with the things and the people that we cherish above all else.
- d. And, that is what we do in baptism.
- i. By bringing forward Kellen for baptism, Daria and Andrew are entrusting him to God. The reality of this world is that they will not always be able to protect and provide for him. And yet, the promise of faith is that God is able to do what they cannot.
 - ii. In the liturgy, we are reminded of God's promises to care for and provide for all of God's beloved children, and we celebrate these promises as we recognize Kellen as one of God's children.
 - iii. In the baptismal covenant, we commit ourselves – and Kellen – to the way of Jesus (even when it is the way of the cross!), trusting that it is truly the way of life.

Amen.