
✠ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

Last Sunday was designed to be a reprieve—a respite from the intensity of fasting and of our Lenten lessons. And that reprieve was felt and heard in the lessons.

We heard of the miracle of multiplication of bread and fish. With five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus fed 5000 hungry men—and children and women, too. All ate to their fill; twelve baskets were filled with leftover bread.

With Jesus, only a little is plenty; only a little bread, only a little faith.

This Sunday, our lessons again intensify; they press us to the limit of faith. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son? Jesus tells the crowd that they are children of satan?

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. (John 8:44a, ESV)

None of this is pleasant to hear.

Everyone seems to be tempted to only listen to what we want to hear. The therapeutic, soothing, comforting spirit says: “Life is easy. If you want it, it can't be wrong. If someone wronged you, it must be their fault.” It is the spirit of our age—perhaps the spirit of every age. It is derivative to that ancient serpent's voice that said: “Did God really say?” After all, such a delicious looking fruit—a clearly edible fruit—shouldn't be forbidden; it should be eaten.

The devil works by changing our desires to the wrong kinds of desires; in short, he lies to us. That's how the devil works, the one whom Jesus names “a liar and the father of lies.” The devil deceives. We fall for his tricks, his treachery, his lies. There are times we *want* his lies to be true. There are times we don't *want* to listen to God. Because, again, we tend to be tempted to hear what we want to hear.

John's Gospel presents us with an unsettling contrast: either God is our Father, or the devil is; either we are God's children, or we are the devil's children. None of us gathered in the Name of the Holy Trinity want to be the children of satan. None of us are the devil's children; none of us want to be his children. Still—that's the danger that awaits those who succumb to the temptation to listen to only *parts* of God's Word.

Turn to our passage from Genesis. It's a familiar, yet scandalizing passage. God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It is right at the threshold of being inconceivable, of being not obey-able.

How could God do such a thing? The command is scandalizing. And then, Abraham acquiesces; he takes Isaac with him to the mountain, to sacrifice him. Isaac clues in: “Everything else is here; where is the animal for the sacrifice?” Abraham replies: “God will provide.”

We could take turns, here, blaming God for giving this order, and blaming Abraham for following it. But if we do so, we will miss what God has done with Abraham, what God may do with us.

God tested Abraham. We can complain all we want about the way God tested Abraham; but we can be sure that God tested him and will test us. And, if we reflect for more than a little, we realize that it's the kind of thing we want God to do. If we were never tested, what would that say about what God thinks of us?

Consider any sport. What kind of athlete improves without being hard pressed? What kind of athlete demonstrates his ability without being tested at his limit? When we see that spark of greatness in a football game, in soccer, in whatever sport you like, that's because we're seeing real-time the athlete demonstrate his ability at *the* limit of his ability.

Still, God testing Abraham was no game; it was a matter of life and death for his son. And so, what we find in this test, what we discover is that Abraham trusted God. Now—did Abraham have any reason, at this point, to trust God? How could Abraham trust God given God has just told him to sacrifice his son?

That’s the mystery of this passage, but it’s a mystery that has long since been revealed. And it’s the same answer to the trials and tribulations that you go through. It comes to us from Moses in Deuteronomy:

[3] And [God] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.
(Deuteronomy 8:3, ESV)

“Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

The command to sacrifice his son is not the only thing that Abraham has heard from the mouth of the Lord. We are told specifically at the beginning of this startling passage that God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, happened “after these things.” That clue is important. We need to know what things have already happened. So—what things have already happened?

- (1) In Genesis 12, God promised *a childless* Abraham that he would become the father of many nations.
- (2) In Genesis 17, God made that promise even more specific—God would make the *childless* Abraham the father of many nations through his wife Sarah.
- (3) In Genesis 17, God Abraham that the promise would continue through his son *Isaac*: “I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.” (Genesis 17:19 ESV)
- (4) In Genesis 21, Sarah gives birth to Isaac—just as promised. (Genesis 21:1–3, ESV)
- (5) In the chapter immediately preceding ours, God re-affirmed that this covenant would continue through Isaac: “Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” (Genesis 21:12, ESV)

So, Abraham has already heard a litany of promises from God, and God has made good so far on almost all of them.

God promised that Sarah would conceive and bear a son, that his name would be Isaac, and that through Isaac he would established an everlasting covenant. God *confirmed* this same promise to Sarah, letting her know *when* she would have a son. And then, Sarah *did give birth* to Isaac.

At this point, there’s just one promise that remains unfulfilled—that Isaac would have children through whom the everlasting covenant would be established.

So, either God is going to break his covenant with Abraham; or God is still going to fulfill his covenant with Abraham.

In faith, Abraham took Isaac with him up the mountain, believing that God would still fulfill his covenant with him, and with Isaac. The author of Hebrews confirms this:

[17] By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, [18] of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” [19] He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead. (Hebrews 11:17–19a, ESV)

Abraham was tested to the very limit of his faith. And because he was found faithful, we have a singular story that reveals that, all along, it was always going to be God himself who gave up his Son, the Son of God who offered himself up as the eternal sacrifice for the sake of the world.

Abraham’s would-be sacrifice of Isaac foreshadowed how God would give up his own Son for the life of the world.

It's this Jesus who has come into the world to defeat and destroy the devil, the father of lies. It is because of the devil, who from the beginning, deceived Eve—who along with Adam, brought death in the world—that Christ has come into the world; for he has entered the world to destroy the works of the devil—sin, evil, death.

And so, *at the Temple*—for this is where this dialogue happened—God himself in their midst, in the Temple—Jesus speaks to his people, and claims to be none other than the *I Am*—the one who was before Abraham, the one who spoke to Abraham long ago.

And yet, what did the Jews accuse Jesus—the *I AM*; the Son of God—of? That he was possessed by a demon, that Jesus was possessed by one of the very things he had come to destroy. It does not go well for them, and it will not go well for any of us, if we accuse God of doing the devil's things. In making this accusation, they are revealed to be the very children of the devil.

But the Jews are completely unfazed by this, because by lineage, they are the descendants of Abraham. And they know, as do we, that God made a covenant with Abraham, and with his descendants. Indeed, this was the very promise that strengthened the faith of Abraham, so that he could trust God who told him to sacrifice Isaac.

But the question for them—and we'll see in just a moment how it is the same question for us—is birthright enough? Is simply being a descendant of Abraham enough to receive the privileges and promises made to him?

Is God's promise given to *every* descendant of Abraham, every descendant of Isaac, every descendant of Jacob? No. For example, when the people of Israel wander in the wilderness guided by Moses, many are *cut off* from the people. It did not matter that they were descendants of Abraham. They were cut off, because they did not keep the commandments of God.

And so, bringing the question forward to us, is it enough that we also have received God's promise to Abraham in baptism? Is it enough simply that we have been baptized, just as the men of Israel were circumcised?

No—it will do us no good if we do not *hold fast* to the promise of God *in faith*. Those who believe, those who have faith, *keep* God's commandments.

51 Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

Faith is not a button that is pressed only once or twice at baptism and at confirmation. Faith is the spring of eternal life welling up within us to trust God through suffering, through confusion, through trials, through come what may. Faith is what enabled this congregation to take a stand, to leave the ELCA, to join the NALC. Faith is what has enabled each of us you (and me) to endure this far in this life. Faith is what will keep us in this life, unto the life that is to come.

And our faith, of course, is not generic, random, vague, or any such notion. Our faith is in Christ Jesus, and him alone. We trust him to do what he says. We trust that he is good and that he is God. We trust that he will raise us up on the last day. We trust that, though we are sinners, he will judge us on the merits of his own mercy and his own sacrifice.

Selective listening will get us nowhere. Hearing only what we want to hear will get us nowhere. Following the ways of these priests, these Pharisees, and the culture of our day, where it's just an easy, unbothered, no pressure, soothing life, will get us nowhere.

All of us will be tested. And though none of us may like *how* we are appointed to be tested, all of us should realize that testing means that God wants the delight of finding us faithful, and us finding him to be good—come what may.

Testing means that it's time for our faith to grow or to be strengthened or to be pressure tested. And just as athletes demonstrate who they are—what they do at the limits of their strength and agility—so, too, God demonstrates who we are by testing us, if we are able, right to the limit of our faith.

And so, let us not be those who pick and choose what we want from Scripture or from faith. Let us be those who hear God's word, keep it, and remain faithful to Christ our Lord through the very end.

Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever. **Amen and amen.**