

For four weeks now we have been reading parts of what scholars call “The Abraham Saga”. The particular track we are following in our lectionary shows that we will be reading about the ancient history of the Hebrew people for the rest of the liturgical year.

We have begun with Abraham. We will also hear about Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We will then journey into the book of Exodus, and read about Moses, and what are known as the “Wilderness Wanderings” of the Hebrews.

We will hear of the Hebrews finally crossing into the promised land, and we will hear a bit about the early history of Israel.

This morning we have the climax of the Abraham saga. We will hear no more about Abraham in the weeks, and months to come. Next week we will turn our attentions more fully to Isaac.

Our passage this morning is iconic. It has been the inspiration for paintings, sculptures, poems, songs, and literature. It is near impossible to read these verses without being affected by them in some way.

This passage is widely known in Christianity as “The Sacrifice of Isaac”. Our Jewish brothers and sisters instead call it the “Binding of Isaac”. Perhaps that is simply a nod to the fact that Isaac wasn’t sacrificed in the end. Perhaps it is a way to tone down the pain, and pathos of this passage.

Throughout the Abraham Saga, the rabbis teach that Abraham’s faith is tested ten times. These tests include leaving his homeland, the abduction of his wife Sarah, fathering a child with his concubine Hagar, and then eventually having to banish that child.

But today God’s test of Abraham is the culmination of all of them.

There are so many nuances to this story, and many of them are hidden in the Hebrew text, eluding us in the English. From the ordering of the phrase, “your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac,” to the fact that there is no command from God in this passage, only a request.

God says to Abraham, “Take your son....” In the Hebrew it reads more like, “Please take your son....” This is not a command, it is a request, and, as we are told clearly, it was a test.

This passage brings up many, many questions for me, and I am faced with a challenge this morning. My mentor, the Rev. Dr. Matt Currin taught me to never step into the pulpit without a word of hope.

But where is the hope in this? A friend of mine in seminary would lean over to me in chapel, after some of the more edgy Scriptural readings, and ask me, “Where’s the Good News in that?”

My Old Testament professor would share with us that, at times, it is more powerful to let the Scriptures read us, rather than us reading the Scriptures. This passage surely reads us.

Abraham has proved himself faithful. He has proven the terrifying limits of his faith. It tells us that God tested Abraham ultimately, and Abraham proved so faithful, that God had to intervene.

This passage can remind us that we, too, will be faced with paradoxes, and challenges, even tests. Sometimes we will find them within the pages of our Scriptures, like today’s story. Other times we will find them in the circumstances of our lives, as they unfold.

Sometimes we will be faced with moments like this morning, when we ask where is the Good News in

this? Sometimes we will be called to let the events unfolding before us read us, rather than us reading them.

But this is nothing new. Centuries ago, way back into the fourth century, one of the storied saints, and pillars of the Church, St Augustine of Hippo told us,

“We are speaking of God, what marvel if you don’t comprehend? For if you comprehend, he is not God.”

Today’s reading makes me wildly uncomfortable. I suspect many of you share that response with me. But, the story is part of our faith. Sometimes our Scriptures, as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr told us, comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.

Perhaps our story this morning tells us of the faith of Abraham, how he was unwilling to place anything above his faithfulness to God, even his beloved son. Its dire and striking narrative lays bare that we are called to radical faithfulness, not to selective commitments.

Surely Abraham, and Isaac both walked away from these events changed, challenged to make sense of what had just happened. These thousands of years later we share in that desire to understand.

Over the centuries humanity has engaged this single story and has yet to fully understand what it means, and what its full implications are. Sometimes the things of God defy our ability to comprehend them. Frankly, I am thankful for that.

Because in the end the truth remains that God is God. God will be God. We will never fully comprehend God, and if we could, he would not be God.

So go forth practicing your faith, knowing that there will be tests. But know also that within these tests, in our most costly and confounding moments, God is with us.

Faith doesn't mean we will always understand God, but it does mean that we can always trust God.