

**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A – Genesis 22:1-14**  
**St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ**

***Walking together in love***

*“Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’  
So the two of them walked on together.”*

Yes, I've chosen to preach on *that* Scripture reading. *That* reading that preachers and rabbis and ordinary folks have wrestled with for centuries. *That* reading that is one of the most frightening, horrifying, and disturbing ones in the Bible. *That* reading that challenges our understanding of who God is for us.

The story of Abraham and Isaac is one that I have pondered on and off for several decades. As an undergraduate music major, I chose to feature Benjamin Britten's *Canticle II* on my senior recital. *Abraham & Isaac* is the second of five canticles that Britten wrote over several decades during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. His musical composition is based in the text of a 15<sup>th</sup> century Chester Mystery Play which interprets this passage from Hebrew scriptures through a Christian lens. Britten's text imagines Isaac being old enough to reason with his father and accept his place in fulfilling God's commandment. As they go up the mountain together, Isaac implores his father to tell him why he has a heavy heart. He notices that his father is not joyful about fulfilling God's bidding, but rather he is becoming increasingly anxious. Evidently, Isaac

is not yet aware that he is the one intended for sacrifice. Once Isaac realizes that it is God's will that he be slain, he asks for his father's blessing. Then he willingly submits to be bound and sacrificed with the keen awareness that his mother's heart will surely be devastated by such news.

In the biblical narrative, there is no discussion or struggle between father and son when the time comes for the boy to be bound and placed on the altar. The sparse description of this scene prompts listeners to raise numerous questions. Does Isaac wonder if his father has gone mad? Does he remember what happened to Hagar and his half-brother, Ishmael, because of his own mother's fear and jealousy? Does Abraham remember God's reassurance that Ishmael and Hagar would be provided for in the desert and in the making of his own great nation? Does Abraham wonder why God would ask him to complete such a horrific task? Does he wonder how he could be the father of a multitude of nations if his beloved son is sacrificed? Do we wonder why Abraham does not plead with God to be merciful and spare his son's life in the same way he recently pleaded for the lives of the righteous and the wicked in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? Does Abraham silently ask, "what happened to the God I thought I knew; the One who made a covenant with me?" Does Abraham wonder what he will tell Sarah when he returns home without their son? Will Sarah wonder if God's will was fulfilled in punishment for her harsh treatment of Ishmael and Hagar? Do you wonder

where the Good News is in this complicated story – whether it is the biblical version or the one based on the Chester Mystery Play?

Numerous theologians and philosophers have interpreted this passage from Hebrew Scriptures through a distinctively Christian lens. But those perspectives have become problematic for 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners considering that this narrative is sacred to all three Abrahamic world religions. This sacred text raises so many questions, and seems to offer no definitive answers. And yet, as a people of faith, we believe that this story must reveal at least a glimpse of truth about who God is, especially in relationship with God's beloved people.

In recalling last week's excerpt from Genesis, we feared that Abraham's first son, Ishmael, had been left to die under a bush in the wilderness. But God heard Ishmael's cry, and God responded with mercy and justice. God provided for Ishmael and Hagar as they journeyed to Egypt. And God provided a wife for Ishmael to fulfill God's promise that he, too, would be the father of a great nation. God not only hears and responds, but God sees and provides.

In today's reading we hear how God sees Abraham desperately trying to faithfully respond to God's will. And God responds to Abraham's anguish and confusion with abundant grace. Could it be that in his overly zealous desire to be obedient to God's will, Abraham misinterprets what God desires of him? Could it be that in his obsession to please God, he passed over an opportunity

to prayerfully discern God's will? Even in the best of circumstances, discernment processes can be obscured by self-imposed limitations. And our attentiveness to God's will can be derailed by focusing on our own fears, and ignoring divinely implanted instincts for compassion and love.

Do we always see and hear in ways that God intends we do? Do we faithfully strive to perceive God's truth, or do we settle on easy solutions that fit within the narrow vision of our personal theologies? Do we wonder who God is for us when life's trials and tribulations seem overwhelming? Do we imagine that God is testing our belief in God's covenant with us when we are challenged by life's circumstances? Whether we are wrestling with health issues, or having difficulties a family member, or struggling with unexpected financial concerns, or uncertain about the direction of our career, God promises to walk with us up the mountain and to help us see that there is another way forward; a way that is graced with love, compassion, and kindness.

In a world filled with unreasonable demands, unnecessary turmoil, and unconscionable actions, we who are faithful, must prayerfully listen for the still small voice of God in our midst. The voice that attunes our ears to hear the cries of hungry and thirsty children; the voice that focuses our eyes to see the agony of those struggling through the wilderness; the voice that inspires

us to generously respond to human need; the voice that asks us to reconsider our definitions of obedience, binding, and testing.

Could it be that the obedience that God desires is our obedience to Love? Could it be that the binding that God invites is the binding of each other's wounds for the healing of all nations? Could it be that the testing that God engages with us are tests of our hearing and vision? Could it be that God desires that we look beyond humanly constructed notions of where and how and with whom we walk together in love?

May God kindle in our hearts the courage to journey beyond comfortable boundaries that restrict our perspectives - that all may rejoice in the healing power of God's love.

+ + +