

II Lent (b)  
 March 8, 2009  
 Gn 17.1-7,15-16  
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What on earth are we to make of this story? What kind of “loving” God tortures his most faithful servants by putting them through such an awful charade? What are we to make of this very troubling story of Abraham and Isaac?

Well, throughout history, **much** has been made of it.

Some have said that it was intended as a vivid teaching moment. In a tribal culture where oral tradition was the most important means of passing on the wisdom of the ages, we can almost feel the warmth of the campfire as some village elder told the story... every listener on the edge of his seat in wide-eyed wonder,...right up to the very moment of the stirring conclusion. Ah, tragedy averted in the nick of time... by the intervening hand of an angel!



And the point to be taken from such a nail biting drama was that, unlike the gods of their pagan neighbors, Yahweh did not allow human sacrifice.

But if that is the **only** point of the story, it seems that there sure could have been better ways to express it!

Surely, there is more to the story than that.

Moslems believe that it was Ishmael, the *other* son of Abraham who was almost sacrificed. In fact, there is an old tradition that Isaac and Ishmael competed for the privilege, each arguing as to which loved God more!

In the middle ages, some Rabbis taught that the angel arrived too late, and that Isaac actually was killed. But that he was raised from the dead, thereby attempting to make the point that the sacrifice of Isaac was just as important as the sacrifice made by Jesus.

But none of these fanciful interpretations have ever had any official merit in either the Christian or the Jewish communities.

As always, if we wish to know how scripture is to be truly interpreted within a faith community, we need to know how it is used in worship.

At the Jewish celebration of Rosh Hashanah, the judgment day for the New Year, this passage of scripture is the context of a prayer for mercy:

*Remember unto us O Lord our God, the **Covenant** and the **Loving Kindness** and the **Oath** which thou swore unto Abraham our father on Mount Moriah; and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform thy will with a perfect heart. So may thy compassion overbear Thine anger against us. In the great goodness, may thy great wrath turn aside from thy people, thy city, and thine inheritance.*

On many levels, it is a beautiful prayer. But there is one phrase that is likely to hang us up... and it is the real culprit in our difficulty with the whole Abraham and Isaac story. In fact, it is the whole problem that some contemporary people have with the death of Jesus as well. So let us first ask the question, ***What does it mean when we ask God to suppress his anger?***

Our problem, of course, is that we are using human language in our feeble attempt to describe Divine behavior. It sounds almost as if we are sending God, like a petulant child, to sit in His “time out” chair until he can regain his composure. Or a pal saying to an angry husband, *You are in no mood to make a decision tonight. Sleep on it, and you will feel calmer in the morning.*

I would suggest to you that the God we worship has superior impulse control to our own. He does not “fly off the handle” nor make rash decisions. He is not a fire belching deity whose anger must be placated.

So what, then, are we to make of this kind of language? I would suggest to you that these ancient liturgical formula are all a part of the Biblical notion of remembrance. Just as Abraham would plead for the people of Sodom, and Moses on behalf of the wayward in the wilderness, so too is this prayer: *Lord, remember your servants. Remember that you have bound us together through your own promise. Act towards us according to your loving mercy, and not according to the punishment we deserve.*

It is the prayer of a people who know at once their own shortcomings, and yet they dare to presume upon the mercy of God, simply because he is “family” and has called them as His people. And we all know, it is easier to presume upon the kindness of family than upon that of a complete stranger.

It is in the acknowledgement of relationship that true love and forgiveness can flourish.

And in that kind of relationship, complete, unhindered trust is the ideal. Any one who has ever heard me teach on the sacrament of marriage knows that I like to quote from the English prayerbook the beautiful words, *With this ring, I thee wed, with my Body, I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods, I do thee endow.*

What a beautiful expression of what marriage is supposed to be! Nothing held back. *I am yours and you are mine. With all that I am, and all that I have, I give myself to you without reservation, and until death do us part.*

Ah, but it is an ideal to be sought! It is very seldom achieved.

Bishop Allison used to scandalize people by saying, *What the Church needs is more hypocrites!* But then he would go on to define his terms, *a hypocrite is merely one who aspires to a righteousness beyond that which he possesses.*

And that is a perfect description of the process of sanctification... of *growing* in holiness. God loves us even in our sinfulness. He “binds his anger” ... he “suppresses his wrath” because he wishes that we, having received a mercy that we do not deserve, will grow more and more in our trust.

In the story of Abraham and Isaac, we see the ideal. It is a story to teach us that when God asks for our trust, no matter how impossible the situation may seem, he is in fact trustworthy.

And God bless Father Abraham for this act of faith. How his hand must have trembled. How his soul must have been tortured! And lest we forget, it wasn't a picnic for poor Isaac either!

But Abraham and Isaac are type and shadow of that which is to come. The very spot on Mt Moriah where this incident is said to have taken place would become the very spot where the Temple of Solomon would be built. On the place of that **one** act of trusting obedience, where *the Lord would provide*, sacrifices and prayers would ascend for centuries.

And from that same city, a solitary figure would one day stumble through those winding streets, likewise bearing the wood for his sacrifice.

Like Abraham, he would be asked to trust implicitly: *Give me this life, and I will return it to you.* Like Abraham and Isaac, there is deep inner turmoil and anguish, *Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.*

And yet, in perfect trust, he goes obediently...willingly... to the death for which he was born: *It is finished. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.*

Isaac was bound to an altar of wood and stone.

Jesus was bound eternally to frail human flesh, in order that he might show his love for us... by taking upon himself the cruelest insults of the very ones he had come to save.

We sinners are his family. And even in our sinfulness, he is day by day making us worthy to presume upon the mercy of God. To count on it. To trust in it. To know beyond all doubt that in his hands, nothing that has borne the marks of his love, is ever, ever lost.

*Remember unto us O Lord, thy Covenant, thy loving kindness, and thy oath which thou swore unto Abraham our Father on Mt. Moriah.*

+++AMEN