

AQEDAH

Sermon 868

June 29, 2014

Third Sunday after Pentecost

952nd Week as Priest

778th Week at St Dunstan's

43rd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I am leaving on vacation next week, but before I go, I wanted to leave with you a vivid recollection of one of the most difficult of the sacred stories from the Bible. This is not to disturb you unnecessarily (although the story is disturbing), rather to remind us all of the essential foundation of faith and belief that we have in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

God tests Abraham in today's lesson, taken from the 22nd chapter of the Book of Genesis. Abraham, by this time, has already been chosen, called by God, to be the father of his people Israel, and to all the nations of the earth. In last week's lesson, you remember that we

discovered the origin of the nations in Abraham's two sons—Ishmael and Isaac. In the meantime, God has also made an everlasting covenant with Abraham, changing his name and marking him as God's man.

But now, God tests Abraham. This is surprising in itself. And God tests this righteous man by the most difficult means imaginable. Abraham is to take his son, his 'only son Isaac,' whom he loves, to the holy mountain and there sacrifice him. God is demanding the life of Isaac (who by this time scholars estimate is a 37-year-old man), for no other reason than evidence of faith.

This sacred story is known in the Hebrew as 'Aqedah,' the Binding of Isaac. It is disturbing, haunting, and unbelievably violent. And, because of its unflattering portrayal of both God and Abraham, I believe the story to be unflinchingly true. True on a literal level—but also true in the context of our own lives and circumstances. Here's what I mean.

Abraham is a righteous man, meaning that he is faithful to God, whatever the circumstances, whatever the anticipated outcome. Abraham is not perfect, and

anyone who reads the Book of Genesis knows well that Abraham is flawed and utterly human. But Abraham is faithful—and as Saint Paul said, he is therefore reckoned as righteous. To be faithful means to keep trying to be good and to do good. And that is the test of Abraham.

What greater demand could God have made of Abraham? He was an old man when Isaac was born, and his wife Sarah was far beyond child-bearing years. How could God’s promise of descendants—children and grandchildren—come about if Isaac were to die? And worse, how could God demand the murder of his son? And even more, how could God demand that he, Abraham, be the murderer? It defies rational explanation. It flies in the face of all that we know to be holy and right and good. And yet this is precisely what God demands.

The Christian existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard found in the story of the Aqedah the most compelling and demanding expression of faith in the face of absurdity. Kierkegaard was deeply disturbed by the Binding of Isaac, and he used it as the basis for his famous work, “Fear and Trembling.” That, by the way, is

a reference to Paul's Letter to the Philippians, "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

For Kierkegaard, this sacred story has at its core a choice that Abraham must make: He can obey God and kill his son, or he can just try to forget about it. But he could not forget it. The anxiety that Abraham experienced was beyond our imagination. Kierkegaard described Abraham's decision as a complete resignation. He realized that the only choice he had was to give up everything that separated him from the love of God, and everyone whom he loved more than God, in order to be absolutely faithful.

We may never face such an ultimate demand of faith, and indeed, we would almost certainly decide not to do what was demanded—on the basis of ethics, morality, reason, and common sense. But the Aqedah is a type (that is, an example or allegory) of the demands of faith that we may well face in our own lives.

Have you ever had to make a difficult choice that tested your faith, or even your sanity? Perhaps you have left a job or career because of moral or ethical reasons.

Maybe you have broken off a relationship because of the demands of your own conscience. Yes, in fact, we may face many, many of these tests of faith throughout our lives, on a continuing basis, simply because of the nature of what it means to be human.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, there is a point at which Moses tells the people about God's intentions for them. Moses uses a phrase, *steadfast love* (the Hebrew word is *chesed*) to describe the way to live. He is speaking for God, and he says,

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.

This is the choice that we all face, many times in our lives. We have to choose between life and death, blessing

and curse. Let us choose to be people of God. Let us choose life and blessing. **AMEN.**