

Pent 7A (Proper 8A)

What a powerful, dramatic and really frightening story we heard about Abraham. There he was, a reasonably successful man in a major city. Suddenly he got called by a strange thing – God – to leave his home with his family and household to go ??? miles away to a new place that only God knew about. And he did it. And persuaded his group to do it too. As far as we know there were no defections. And they caravanned their way across the trade routes of the fertile crescent to the land promised to them by God. No real harm comes to them, so ok, they decided to continue worshipping this strange new invisible god.

Along the way, God blesses Abraham with two sons, one born of his mistress, and one born to his wife Sarah way after she should have been infertile. And the promise of God is that from Abraham would come offspring as numerous as dust of the earth.

So then he is asked to offer Isaac as a sacrifice to God. Offer: the operative word in God's is offer. Present a gift. Not necessarily go through with the deed. Depending on the quality of the offering, it could possibly be not accepted. This is probably what Abraham must have prayed. How else could he have made that journey? Continually fighting in his mind, his obedience to God, and his love of his son, promised by the same God to be the beginner of an enormous crowd of descendants? Was he going mad in the harsh sun of the Middle East? All that trekking and leading taking its toll on an old man?

It goes against the grain of all logic to think that Abraham might have even contemplated such a move, actually following through on God's request. What becomes the struggle in the story of Abraham, is that Abraham is not giving himself as the offering. That would logically speak of his faith. He is asked to sacrifice someone else who is maybe not willing to take on the role of sacrifice. Along the way Isaac must have figured out that there was something fishy going on, but shared his father's faith until the end. He did accept what was being asked. He never struggled. Fortunately the story has a happy ending. Though if I were Isaac, I think I would keep a careful eye on my father from that time on. Even if I received a generous dose of faith in God from the whole incident.

The new testament readings seem at first to be on a totally different track than Abraham, in reading them, I found the theme. The cost of discipleship.

First with Abraham – how much are you willing to put on the line of God?

In Paul's letter to the Romans, living in a rather vulgar society in capital of the Roman Empire, he stresses living a life apart from the mainstream culture. Not by just behavior given through a set of laws, but on how we should act towards each other.

Matthew writes a rather positive take on the rewards of being righteous in our own times, not just in the life to come.

Most of the time the cost of discipleship comes down to the idea that we need to sacrifice something. Usually we take that to mean giving up nice things or sharing our wealth, or suffering in some way for our faith in Jesus. And we are, in our Western European and American way of thinking ready to even give up our lives if necessary to protect our family and our way of life. Maybe even sacrifice our lives for God.

But what about the positive way we can look at the cost of discipleship? The thing is, if you are truly living as, these aren't sacrifices at all. We aren't giving *up* something

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we need, we are giving *to* someone in need. And there is no anger or begrudging when we feel that way in our own hearts.

Where Abraham was asked to offer Isaac as a sacrifice for God, we Christians have a parallel story in God sacrificing his son Jesus for the rest of humanity. If we draw the parallel to willingness, Isaac and Jesus both obey the will of those who are doing the offering. Ultimately we receive the blessing of the sacrifice through our understanding of what that sacrifice meant.

First it meant that no further death sacrifice would be necessary as part of worship. No more killing a sheep or goat or bird in order to help send our prayer along to God, or to die for us and take our sins with it to God. All we are asked for, as was Abraham before us, to live as God wants, and to acknowledge his power over us. God is both creator of the universe and our personal protector and comforter. Each time we pray we reinforce our thankfulness for our creation, and dependence on God for all the talents and resources we have received from God..