

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, June 29, 2008.

Proper 8 Year A

Genesis 22:1-14, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

There is something about tests that makes many of us uncomfortable. I only have to say the words, "there's going to be a test," and immediately our anxiety level begins to rise. In school, many of us learn to fear and revere tests as the standard by which our learning is judged. "Is it going to be on the test?" we ask. "You said it wouldn't be on the test!" we protest. These days, we subject our children at younger and younger ages to more complex and convoluted assessments of their academic performance. While most of us hate being tested, we seem to trust that tests tell us something useful. As I said, we fear and revere the test. Well, what about spiritual learning? Is there going to be a test for faith? Is there going to be a measure of our spiritual achievement? Does God have a "no soul left behind" policy? Will God have a number two pencil for us, or should we bring our own? The short answer: there will be a test. The good news is that the tests of faith do not involve making the grade. The tests of faith reveal God's mercy and in turn make us righteous in God's eyes.

In the lesson from Genesis this morning, God tests Abraham. Now I am sure Abraham would have much preferred a test with a number two pencil over the test he had to perform. God asks Abraham to sacrifice, literally slaughter, his son, his only son, Isaac, the one whom he loves. It seems like a cruel twist. God has provided Abraham and Sarah with a son when they are well beyond childbearing years. God performs a miracle in their lives and then asks Abraham to undo that miracle. It is perhaps beyond our understanding. Sometimes people ask if this story actually happened. We cannot know for sure whether Abraham was an actual historical figure. What we do know is that at some point in history, people started talking about this Abraham and started telling stories, including this one, that were passed down from generation to generation. The tellers of the story found something inspiring in it. They found something that expressed their understanding of God in this bizarre tale of God requiring Abraham to sacrifice his son. And it is because generations of believers have found this story so important that we hear it again today and ponder God's testing methods. We wonder, "Why did God have to test Abraham in this way?"

This test is certainly not the last one in scripture. Over and over, God's people are examined. Their faith is tried. In the Epistle from Romans, Paul speaks of choosing between obedience to sin or obedience to righteousness. He does not explicitly use the word, "test," but he is talking about a kind of examination in which we make a choice that grades our faith or lack thereof. In the Gospel this morning, Jesus is sending his disciples out to preach the kingdom of heaven, to heal the sick and exorcise demons. His sending of these disciples is in some ways a test as well. For he says, "those who welcome you, welcome me, and those who welcome me welcome the one who sent me." If a village or town welcomes the disciples, offers them a cup of cold water, then that town passes the test; they receive their reward.

And as I said, many of us fear tests. Very few of us enjoy mental, physical, or spiritual trials. We pray in the Lord's prayer... "lead us not into temptation." The phrase is more accurately translated, "lead us not into testing." We anticipate that God will test us, and we pray to be spared. We may be afraid that we will not measure up. We may wonder if we can make the

grade. We certainly do not want to endure the spiritual version of summer school while everyone else is enjoying a heavenly vacation. At times we wonder if some of the hardships and challenges we face are God's way of testing us. A strange sickness or injury comes upon us and we ask, "are you testing me, God?" I know many people who, when they meet a homeless person or someone in great need, wonder: "is this an angel in disguise?" "Is this some kind of test of my kindness and generosity?" Maybe. Maybe not. God only knows. What seems certain is that tests are part of life and they often make us nervous and fearful.

If we go back to Abraham and this story of the binding of Isaac, one of the most striking things is that Abraham does not seem nervous or fearful. He does not protest, as many of us would. "Hey, God, this test is kind of hard, don't you think?!" Abraham obeys God's command and prepares to sacrifice his son. The story does not reveal his inner thoughts. It only tells us that he did as he was told. And just as he is about to slay Isaac, an angel from God speaks and stops the test. In an act of mercy, God prevents Abraham from completing the sacrifice. We might question how merciful God really is here, because God was the one who asked him to kill in the first place. But for a moment, let us put on the ears of those who passed this story down from generation to generation. Let us hear what they might have heard, what might have inspired them. For the early tellers of this story, the deities and rulers they were familiar with would have no problem asking for the life of a firstborn as a sign of loyalty, as a tribute of faithfulness. The deities and rulers of the ancient world were ruthless. And so for the early tellers of this story, they would not have been as incredulous as we are that Abraham's God would ask for such a sacrifice. What would have inspired those early tellers and hearers of this story, what would have compelled them to keep telling it generation after generation and to write it down is the fact that God stops Abraham. God does not delight in the shedding of firstborn blood. The God of Abraham is not ruthless and capricious like the other gods and rulers of the time. True, God is mysterious and sometimes difficult to get along with. But the God of Abraham is a God of mercy, a God of compassion. God tests Abraham, but God tests in a way that reveals God's nature as a God who cares for God's people. And the test also reveals Abraham's nature as a truly faithful servant of God, a righteous man who loves his son but gives his first loyalty to God. God's mercy and Abraham's righteousness: these are the elements of the story that have kept it alive for thousands of years.

We may not be put at ease by my little interpretation of the story. Despite Abraham's righteousness and God's mercy, this story may still make us very uncomfortable. We may still want to say, "the God in this story is not the God I worship." Have we failed some kind of test? We have failed only if the test is whether we feel comfortable with all of scripture; and that is NOT the test. The test, as I said before, is not about answering perfectly or making a grade. The test is about being made righteous, being made in right relationship with God, being made into who God would have us to be. For Abraham, being in right relationship with God meant being willing to sacrifice his beloved son. In order to be the father of many nations, he had to have that kind of faith. Fortunately for most of us, we do not have to play the role of Abraham. So what will our test be? Our test will still involve being righteous, and maybe it can be described in the words Paul uses in our text from the letter to the Romans this morning: "present yourselves to God as instruments of righteousness." The test is not whether we can correctly fill in the blank. The test is whether we can present ourselves to God and be filled with God's grace. Can we present ourselves like Abraham and say, "Here I am!?" Can we allow ourselves to be instruments of God's will, or as St. Francis says in his famous prayer, instruments of God's peace? Where there is hatred, can we sow love? Where there is injury, pardon? Where there is despair, joy? Perhaps this is our test, not to form the right answer, but to be trans-formed by

God's love and God's power into instruments of righteousness.

And if we fear that we will fail the test, we can remember that the God who asked Abraham to sacrifice his son is the same God who sent a son named Jesus Christ to help us on our journey, to suffer the tests and the trials of life with us, to be sacrificed so that we might live, so that we might understand God's love for us.

The next time we feel like God might be testing us, the next time we wonder if an angel in disguise is evaluating our spiritual progress, instead of freezing with fear or shaking with anxiety, we might remind ourselves that God loves us. We might relax and take a deep breath and remember that God is waiting to show us something wonderful, even in the midst of an unpleasant trial. Even if we feel like we fail, we have another opportunity to repent and return to God, who will show us mercy. My brothers and sisters, there will be a test; there will be lots of tests. And it is through these tests that God will show us our faith. It is through these tests that God will reveal to us our righteousness. It is through these tests that we will learn our true identity as God's beloved children.