

Second Sunday of Lent (B)

March 4, 2012

The first reading from Genesis is really tough. I always try to remember the awful truth about the Sunday readings: "Get used to it. They are all tough." However, I must admit that on this Second Sunday of Lent I find myself whining more than usual about today's biblical text. Of course there is a mountain in the Genesis reading and in Mark's Gospel, and I suppose I could wax eloquently about the Olympics and Mount Rainier.

But what are we to do with this image in the first reading of a God who tests Abraham? Of course, we could just rush right to the transfiguration story and agree with Peter, who said, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here." Let's not talk or even think about that first reading. In my preaching in past years I was very content to stay high on the mountain-top with a transfigured Jesus. But since this is the season of Lent, I decided to suffer it out and face my own demons and plunge right into the story of Abraham's would-be sacrifice of his son Isaac. After all, inquiring minds want to know.

What do we make out of a God who tests his faithful servant Abraham as a cat plays with a mouse? How can we relate to a God who is as capricious as March weather and as dangerous as March madness? After all, here was Abraham with his son Isaac, the son who finally had been born to his wife, Sara, when Abraham was seventy-five years old. Remember how Sara had laughed so much when the angel told her that she was pregnant? The Bible says that she laughed so hard that tears streamed down her cheeks, which is why, when the child was born, they called him Isaac, which in Hebrew means "laughter." And now, after all the years of wondering, praying, doubting, God finally sends Isaac, and then God asks that Isaac be sacrificed.

What do we do with such a God? Dismiss this God as the monster God of the Old Testament? But that would be just one more of the anti-Semitic dismissals that we Christians have been so guilty of throughout our history. Or maybe we can run with the speculation of some scholars who say that this story reflects the rejection of infant sacrifice by the Jews in contrast to what their neighbors engaged in. Or maybe we can just view the story as a prefiguring of a God who would sacrifice his only Son for the forgiveness of our sins. Those last two interpretations surely are certainly worthy of our consideration.

But I have another interpretation of this story of sacrifice that I find the most challenging for me spiritually. It comes from Thomas Cahill in his book *The Gift of the Jews*. He takes this primitive story and manifests the great truth it contains. The first time we ever hear the word *love* in the Bible is here in this story. "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love..." This makes Abraham's obedience even more startling, to take what he loves so much and to slaughter him with a knife.

Cahill writes: "For the God who calls Abraham to the Mountain Experience must no longer be seen as the 'Mountain God.' He is the opposite of the pagan gods with their patently human motivations. He is the God beyond the mountain, even beyond the sky, the unknowable God, whose purposes are hidden from human intelligence, who cannot be manipulated. And who is Abraham? He is the contingent one who must *understand* that he is utterly dependent, who must cling consciously to his God, who gives and takes beyond all understanding."

But, like Peter on his mountain, we never seem to learn the lesson of Abraham. We would rather tell God what to do rather than listen to what God wants us to do. We would rather stay comfortable on the mountain than take the next step of faith. We would rather manipulate God than obey God. Cahill concludes: "Can we open ourselves to the God who cannot be understood, who is beyond all our scheming, the God who rains on picnics, the God who allows human beings to be inhuman, who has sentenced us all to death? All the other gods are figments, sorry projections of human desires. Only this God is worth my life (and yours and Isaac's). For 'there is no other.'"

I remember years ago reading an interview that Rose Kennedy had with a reporter. The reporter asked how she could remain such a believer after the assassinations and the other tragedies that came to her family. She did not give a theologically sophisticated answer, nor did she “spin.” She simply stated an old sentence from Catholic piety: “God always gives us sufficient grace to bear any burdens that come our way.” She was a daughter of Abraham. As we continue our Lenten journey let us worship Abraham’s God, who, believe it or not, is always with us and for us and provides for us our daily bread.

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