

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
June 28, 2020; 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

1 Peter 4:12-13

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.

SCRIPTURE READING

Genesis 22:1-14

¹ After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place ["Jehovah Jireh," or] "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

SERMON

Facing Reality

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Years ago, I heard this old joke: "Why was Isaac 12 years old when God called Abraham to sacrifice his son? Because if he had been a teenager, it wouldn't have been a sacrifice." I won't ask for an Amen, but how about a drum rim shot? How can we joke about this very grave family drama? Because we've heard this story since childhood; if you went to Vacation Bible School this was a staple. I remember being into the drama of this story when I was little, but I'm sure I didn't ask the questions that I ask now, and if my Sunday School teachers did, maybe they didn't think it was appropriate to bring up. But let's do.

We always hear about the great faith of Abraham, and by extension Sarah, because of course she was there every step of Abraham's nomadic trek into the desert where God called him—although she's not in today's story. Did Abraham tell her his mission? Boy, that would make for an awkward conversation at the breakfast table! "Honey, God told me last night to sacrifice Junior as a burnt offering, so we're heading out. I'll be back late." No, I'm thinking he kept this to himself. It's true that Abraham is lifted up in the Bible as the epitome of faith in following Yahweh, so much so that he was willing to sacrifice his beloved son, who was the fulfillment of his covenant with God, but today can we say out loud what everybody's thinking? What the heck kind of abusive God would put someone through a test like that? And what the heck kind of father would agree to it?

Does this feel like the God of Love, cruelly toying with Abraham and Isaac, just to see how far Abraham would go to keep faith? Yes, the story mirrors God's sacrifice of God's only son on the altar of the cross. God never asks anything of us that God isn't willing to do, and God knows and feels every pain and hurt and loss that we do. But child sacrifice? Come on, God!

Of course, that's the point. If we look at the historical context of the passage, we remember that child sacrifice to the gods was commonplace in those times. The stunning aspect of Abraham's God is that this God does NOT desire human sacrifice—that's what made the end of this story a surprise for its original hearers. As for old Abe, when he and Isaac and their entourage are heading toward the mountain, he tells his servants, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." (12:5) A sadly tragic lie to set up the child's murder, or does Abraham in fact believe that God promised a covenant of descendants through Isaac, so God will figure this out? On the way up the mountain, when Isaac asks his father where the lamb for the sacrifice is, Abraham promises, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." (12:8) A coy evasion to his child's question? Or, is this a statement of belief from our forefather in faith that God will, indeed, provide, even when it looks horrifically dark? I think the latter. I believe that even when it appeared that circumstances were their most tragic, Abraham believed that he could trust in God to care for him and Isaac, and that God would provide.

And speaking of tragic and dark circumstances, how's your 2020 going? Fun, huh? The pandemic of COVID, the pandemic of racism, the pandemic of economic upheaval? Of course bigotry, bias, class warfare and economic inequity has always been around; 2020 has just forced us to look at what we've been pretending wasn't there. And now I hear there's a giant dust whirlwind descending on us from the Sahara. Yesterday a TV reporter couldn't help himself from commenting, "Now all we need is a plague of locusts, and we've got the complete set." Then, literally ten seconds later, a video correspondent reported on a locust infestation hitting Kenya.

Um, can I take a pass on 2020? I'd like to tap out. And we're supposed to keep faith with this God who demands such sacrifice, at the very least allows it? How long,

O Lord, how long? How long will we be separated? How long before church returns to normal? I found this in my files from ages ago, and now it makes me wistful:

Top 10 Things You Never Hear In Church

1. Hey! It's my turn to sit in the front pew.
 2. I was so enthralled, I never noticed your sermon went 25 minutes overtime.
 3. Personally I find evangelizing much more enjoyable than golf.
 4. I've decided to give our church the \$130 a month I spend for cable TV.
 5. I volunteer to be the permanent teacher for the Junior High Sunday School class.
 6. I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!
 7. Since we're all here, let's start the service early.
 8. Preacher, we'd like to send you to this Bible seminar in the Bahamas.
 9. Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment like a sermon on giving.
- And number ten . . . Do we have to leave now?

(via the Internet)

I've actually heard lots of variations on #10 in the last weeks. We've been forced to leave, and we're in pain. How long? God knows, but God's not telling. And we are an impatient people. Right now we're impatient that God up there in the clouds seems to be silent.

What does it mean to be faithful? Is it myopic or naïve to believe in silent promises that go unanswered for impossibly long times? It seemed so to Sarah when she couldn't help laughing out loud at the promise that she would give birth as an old woman. "Face reality," the world jeers at us. Maybe being faithful means we see beyond what the world promises, to the covenant of God. The world promises a dark reality of pain, loss and death. We see otherwise. We see a different reality, the reality of resurrection.

Abraham unwaveringly believes, despite what his senses tell him. He names the spot of the sacrifice "Jehovah Jireh," which means literally, "the Lord will be seen." Of course, the Lord isn't seen with the world's reality, not with science and quantifiable evidence, nor even necessarily with our own personal experience, for our perception of what is happening in our lives is limited, while God's plan is sometimes veiled. The Lord can only be seen when we interpret our lives through the lens of faith. And when do we need faith more than when God seems far away?

Our Opening Scripture today was from Psalms 13, "O LORD, I trust in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because the LORD has dealt bountifully with me." (vss.5-6) Yes, trust, rejoice, sing! But those are the last verses. It begins with a different tone. The context is despair and sorrow: "How long, O LORD, will you hide from me, and let me bear this pain?" (v.1) My father set this Psalm to the tune "O Shenandoah:"

*How long, O Lord, will you forget me? Ho-w long will your face be hidden?
Ho-w long will I bear sorrow? How long, how long, O Lord?*

*Hear and give me answer.
Consider now, and give me answer. O Lord, O Lord, my God.
Lest I sleep the sleep of death, and all my foes rejoice,
Because I am forsaken.*

But then, in pain and despair, the Psalmist makes a choice:

*But I have trusted in your mercy. I will rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing unto the Lo-rd, because, because you have
bestowed on me your bounty.*

Psalm 13, arranged by Pat McGeachy (to the tune of Shenandoah)

In faith, "I will rejoice; I don't feel it now, but I will sing unto the LORD."

I believe in trying to stay positive, not because I believe life isn't painful, but because I believe hope is the best possible way to cope with pain. In one of our favorite hymns, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," written by Presbyterian minister Henry van Dyke, we sing:

*Ever singing, march we onward,
Victors in the midst of strife,
Joyful music leads us sunward
In the triumph song of life.*

(Henry Jackson van Dyke, Jr., 1907)

We could look at the odds against us in the dark times, and say let's be realistic, or we can say, "Here's what we feel God calls us to do; now let's do it." We may be surprised what we can do with the help of a God in whom all things are possible. But even if it doesn't turn out how we'd hoped, we know that God will keep hanging in there with us. Everybody gets down sometimes, and feels the cloud of hopelessness. That's when it's nice to be surrounded by other hopeful people who keep trying, every new morning. I've heard there are two kinds of people in the world—those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, Lord," and those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good Lord, it's morning." At least we know Sarah liked to laugh.

The Sacrifice of Isaac begins with the preface that the Lord was testing Abraham. This is our test: will we believe in God's promises, will we achieve great things (and/or see the greatness of God in what the world calls tiny things), or will we sit on our rumps, moaning about our bank balance and our job and our spouse and our kids and the state of the world, and say we're facing reality – Will we fail the test by putting our faith in this world, in which success or failure can be measured by various human-made yard-sticks, or will we pass the test, surpass the WORLD, by believing that in Christ we can do all things, that all things are possible, and all things work together for good for those called according to God's purpose? (Romans 8:28) Will we achieve abundant joyful life, so that the realists of this world think we must be drunk, like the disciples on Pentecost? Whose reality will we face?

It's something we can do no matter our circumstances. Jesus, who felt all the pain that we ever have, called out in desolation from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) But as he was taking his last breath, when all seemed hopeless, he said, "Father, into your hands I commend My spirit." (Luke 23:46)

When we look at the world's reality, the only way to face it without falling into despair is to frame it in God's reality, Christ's reality.

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13)

Our reading from 1 Peter tells us not to be surprised at the terrible ordeals around us, but to rejoice—not that the pain is happening, or because we're pretending it isn't, but because we place our faith in the coming light, the revelation of glory that will come to be. As our Bible wraps up its long story of victory, Revelation 21:1-5 says: Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her spouse. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.

God will dwell with them;

they will be God's people, and God's very self will be with them;

⁴ Every tear will be wiped from their eyes.

Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

A new reality. Face into the light.

Amen.