

2nd Sunday of Lent – Cycle B

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Genesis 22:1b-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18

Today as we enter the 2nd Sunday of Lent, a time in which we concentrate on building our faith through penance and sacrifice (what have you offered up for Lent?), we hear of Abraham's faith and the test to which God put that faith. This story is the tenth and greatest trial of Abraham's trials; the number 10 in Hebrew numerology being the number of testimony (law and responsibility). It is the trial of offering his son as sacrifice. Recall that the 10th trial of the pharaoh and Egypt was also the offering of the first born as sacrifice.

This story shows that God is Lord whose demands are absolute, whose will is inscrutable, and whose final word is grace. Abraham shows the moral grandeur of the founder of Israel, facing God, willing to obey God's word in all its mysterious harshness. The father's very life is bound up with that of his son and heir; Abraham entrusts his life and his future unconditionally to the God who calls him. Rather than just the selected verses for today's reading, we will read the entire story.

2:1b God put Abraham to the test.

We, as readers, have an advantage over Abraham, who doesn't look at it as a test, but rather as a command.

He called to him, "Abraham!" "Ready!" he replied. ² Then God said: "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love,

The name Isaac means "laughter," for the reason for this name, see Genesis 18:10-15. God identifies the son as his "only son" because Ishmael has already been lost in Abraham's eyes because he and his mother have been sent away (Genesis 21:10) and are living in the desert of Beersheba (the northern Sinai peninsula). Isaac is from Sara, Abraham's wife while Ishmael (the firstborn) is from Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant.

and go to the land of Moriah.

2 Chronicles 3:1 tells us that in the time of King Solomon the temple was built upon Moriah. Hebrew legend tells us this of Moriah: "When Noah the righteous left the ark, after the waters of the flood had receded and the face of the earth was revealed, he came with his sons first to Mount Moriah. There they sacrificed a thank offering to the Lord, on the same spot where Adam had sacrificed and where Abraham, generations later, bought his

offering. It is told that when Abraham and Isaac reached Mount Moriah, the Holy One, blessed be He, pointed out the altar to Abraham and said: "There is the altar! Upon this altar did Adam, Cain, and Abel place their offerings! Upon this altar did Noah and his sons place their offerings!" On a nearby hill, Shem, the son of Noah, interred the skull of Adam, which he had taken with him into the ark and guarded during the flood. Since then the hill is called Golgotha – the Skull" (Zev Vilnay, *Legends of Jerusalem*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1973, page 70).

There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you."

A holocaust is a whole burned sacrifice; it was irrevocable. Isaac must have been at least a teenager at this point because, as we learn in a few verses, he carried the wood up the mountain (a figure of Christ carrying His cross) while Abraham carried the fire (matches hadn't been invented yet) and the knife.

³ Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took with him his son Isaac, and two of his servants as well, and with the wood that he had cut for the holocaust, set out for the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham got sight of the place from afar. ⁵ Then he said to his servants: "Both of you stay here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on over yonder. We will worship and then come back to you." ⁶ Thereupon Abraham took the wood for the holocaust and laid it on his son Isaac's shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. ⁷ As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. "Father!" he said. "Yes, son," he replied. Isaac continued, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust?" ⁸ "Son," Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust." Then the two continued going forward. ⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.

This was a three-day journey at the end of which a type of resurrection takes place. Isaac has been dead in Abraham's eyes since the journey began. When the sacrifice is halted, he lives again.

Next he tied up his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar. ¹⁰ Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the LORD'S messenger called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. ¹² "Do not lay your hand on the boy," said the messenger. "Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son."

He has obeyed perfectly. Abraham truly fears (reverential awe, not terror) God. He has learned to give up control over his own life that he might receive it as a grace.

¹³ As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram

The ram was, in later times, the usual victim for a holocaust offering (Leviticus 1:10-13).

caught by its horns in the thicket.

Hebrew legend says that one horn was cut off to free the ram and this became the first shofar (the trumpet used to call the people to prayer and to war).

So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham named the site Yahweh-yireh; hence people now say, "On the mountain the LORD will see."

Abraham called this place "Yahweh-jireh" which means "God will provide" (will see to it). This place is known today as jireh-shalom (Jerusalem).

¹⁵ Again the LORD'S messenger called to Abraham from heaven ¹⁶ and said: "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you acted as you did in not withholding from me your beloved son, ¹⁷ I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore; your descendants shall take possession of the gates of their enemies, ¹⁸ and in your descendants all the nations of the earth shall find blessing - all this because you obeyed my command."

God is making a covenant with Abraham by swearing the oath. Since there is no one higher, He must swear by Himself. In swearing the oath, God pronounces curses upon Himself if He doesn't keep the covenant. This is the third covenant God makes with Abraham. In Genesis 12:2-3 God promised Abram (his name before it was changed to Abraham) three things:

- 1) Land (nation). This was the subject of the covenant of Genesis 15 and was fulfilled in Moses.
- 2) Royal dynasty (name). This was the subject of the covenant of Genesis 17:1-19 and was fulfilled in David.
- 3) Worldwide blessing. This was the subject of the covenant made here and was fulfilled in Jesus the Christ.

2nd Reading - Romans 8:31b-34

Our second reading today is a hymn-like passage telling about the love of God which was made manifest in Christ.

^{31b} If God is for us, who can be against us?

A rhetorical question. God's plan of salvation makes it clear to Christians that God is on their side.

³² He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all,

In our first reading, God spared Isaac, the type of Christ. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son (his only one, the one he loved) but God, the just judge, had even then pronounced sentence in our favor.

how will he not also give us everything else along with him? ³³ Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us.

Again, a rhetorical question with the implied answer in the negative

³⁴ Who will condemn? It is Christ (Jesus) who died, rather, was raised,

This is a rare reference for Saint Paul to the exaltation of Christ, it does not allude to the ascension.

who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

The glorified Christ still continues the objective aspect of human redemption – he still presents His sacrifice to the Father on the behalf of all Christians. This is the function of the High Priest.

Gospel - Mark 9:2-10

Today's gospel reading is the familiar account of the transfiguration – an event which is reported in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36) and is alluded to in John (1:14).

The time is a little less than one year before Jesus' sacrifice on the altar of the cross. He has fed the five thousand and the four thousand and Peter has made what is called his "confession of faith" (erroneously, I believe, as faith is little involved – divine revelation is).

² Jesus took Peter, James, and John

The inner circle of His apostles – only these three are close with Jesus here, at the healing of Jairus' daughter, and at Gethsemani. Luke says that Jesus went up the mountain to pray, Mark and Matthew don't tell us why He went up.

and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves.

Mountains are the usual settings for supernatural revelations and theophanies. Traditional identifications of the mountain are Harmon and Tabor; the actual location is unknown and is unimportant.

And he was transfigured before them,

The Greek *metamorphothe* literally describes it. In Latin *trans* means radical change and *figura* means external appearance or body. The disciples are granted a glimpse of Him in His glorified state, which is to be His eternal state after His death and resurrection.

³ and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.

Absolutely pure

⁴ Then Elijah appeared to them

The representative of the Prophets. His assumption into heaven is recorded in 2 Kings 2:11.

along with Moses,

The representative of the Law. Hebrew legend has it that Moses was also assumed into heaven, thus explaining his appearance here in a recognizable bodily form. The Hebrew scriptures, the Law and the Prophets, are fully represented. They witness the fulfillment of what they represent and foretell.

and they were conversing with Jesus. ⁵ Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Tents (booths) were used at the feast of Tabernacles. Peter may feel that the end times are here [Hosea 12:9b (12:10b in the New American Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible)] and wants to eternalize the experience.

⁶ He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.

Peter is at a loss for words, just like at Gethsemani.

⁷ Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;

Just like in the Old Testament theophanies (and also at the Annunciation) the cloud is a representation of God and the overshadowing denotes occupation or indwelling. “It seems to me that this cloud is the grace of the Holy Spirit. Naturally, a tent gives shelter and overshadows those who are within; the cloud, therefore, serves the purpose of the tents. O Peter, you who want to set up three tents, have regard for the one tent of the Holy Spirit who shelters us equally” (Saint Jerome, *Homily 80*).

then from the cloud came a voice, “This is my beloved Son.

The same words as at Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:17)

Listen to him."

Jesus is a prophet like Moses whose teaching must be heeded under penalty of extermination from God's people. Just like at the wedding feast of Cana, "Do whatever He tells you."

⁸ Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.

Moses and Elijah have relinquished their place to Jesus alone.

⁹ As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone,

The descent from the mountain and the command to secrecy are elements of Old Testament theophany patterns [Exodus 32:15 (coming down); Daniel 12:4, 9 (silence)].

except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Unlike other commands to silence in Mark, this one has a special time limit – Christ's resurrection.

¹⁰ So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant.

The disciples' problem was how Jesus could be raised from the dead before and apart from the general resurrection which was to occur at the coming of God's kingdom.