

## Past Sermons

The Second Week in Lent Year B  
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As I was growing up, my grandmother had this “warning” story that she'd tell whenever I, or one of my brothers, gave our parents a hard time about doing something they asked us to, but that we didn't want to do. It was one of those, “when I was a child” stories that usually made our eyes role. But there was something about this story that made me pay attention and drew me to a deeper level of respect and awe of her, and of her message. She would say, “You never know when doing what you're told can save your life. When I was a small child, we lived in India for a time. One evening we were all sitting at the dinner table and my mother said to me, ‘Alice, I want you to listen to me very carefully. I want you to very slowly and without a lot of movement stand up on your chair and crawl across the table to me. Just look at me now, and do what I say.’ Did I argue with her, or say why do I have to do that? No, I did what I was told.”

We knew already that something big was happening in this story, even when we heard it for the first time. She almost didn't need to tell the end of the story, because we knew something terrible would have happened if she did not do what she was told. But she went on. “So, I carefully stood up on my chair and crawled across the table to my mother. And when I was safely in my mother's arms, I turned around saw that there was a big cobra snake in full spread hood right behind my chair. If I had questioned my mother, none of us would be here today. Now do what you are told.”

Well, I don't think that story ever deterred me from questioning things or from asking “why.” I think it is just my nature to need to understand the bigger picture, and that is a good thing. But I have often thought about the character of that story and what it meant. I wonder how my Grammy's mother must have sounded to cause her do exactly what she was told without even an instant of questioning. I imagine that her motherly instincts, the fear and concern she felt for her child, even the dead serious calm in her voice and the intensity of her focus, must have created a certain feel in the room that told everyone that something grave was at stake. She gave a very clear message to my Grammy that her life depended on her obedience.

We get that same sense when we hear the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac. God spoke to Abraham, calling his attention by saying simply, “Abraham.” Can't you almost feel what Abraham must have felt, the stillness of the air and the tension. Abraham responds, “Here I am.” This phrase does not simply communicate one's location like saying, “I'm over here,” or “I'm in the kitchen.” It is a phrase repeated several times in OT text and it acknowledges one's full presence and complete attention. It communicates, “here I am in your presence, as I am, ready to listen and respond with all that is in me.” It carries a sense of sincerity and integrity, and portrays an attention as though the speaker's life depended on it.

Abraham's life does depend on his full attention and his unwavering response to God, because what is at stake is God's promise to Abraham. The promise that Abraham would become the father of many nations. \*You see, this story is not as much about Isaac and his being sacrificed, as it is about the promise, and the relationship between God and Abraham that that promise is predicated upon.\* In this story God Tests Abraham because God needs to know that he can trust Abraham, in order to move into the future with him as God intends. And to pass the test, Abraham needs to trust God; and he does. Even when God asks Abraham to do something that seems to Abraham to jeopardize the promise-killing Isaac would mean Abraham's lineage would come to an end and the promise could not then be fulfilled-Abram trusts God to find another way into the future. Abraham trusts that God will provide.

“God will provide”-the actual translation from the Hebrew means “God sees.” Seeing and showing are significant verbs in the text of this story. God sees all, but Abraham sees only in part, and must be shown the way. God sees that this is a test, but Abraham does not. God shows Abraham the place where he is to go. God sees the ram entangled in the bush, the alternative to the sacrifice of Isaac, but Abraham does not. God sees the way into the future, and through his obedience Abraham sees the way. Through his trusting God Abraham did indeed become the father of many nations, and indeed many faiths. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith traditions all claim Abraham as their beginnings. God sees the way into the future, but we have the choice to be shown or not, to follow or not. It is up to us whether we move into the future with God or not. As followers of Christ we are called to lay down our lives-our personal interests and gains-and take up our cross, take up the way of Christ, and follow. But that's the tricky part, isn't it. How do we know the way of Christ? How do we know God's will for us?

Some individuals, like the now infamous Brian David Mitchell, would say that God has revealed himself to them and they know the true way. But very often these religious fanatics end up doing things that are counter to the very central teachings of the Bible, or become violent and antisocial.

The truth is that we don't always know the way of Christ. We see only in part and we are dependent. dependent on God as revealed through the word and sacrament. Dependent on what history and tradition teach us about following God's ways. Dependent on our spiritual community to be a compass and a sounding board for our thoughts and ideas. Dependent on our relationship with God and one another to make it through life.

Abraham faced a horrendous crisis when God tested him, and the solution to his test was to depend on the very thing that was testing him.

Does God test us? Yes. Do we know when God is testing us? Not always. Is God testing us now? I can't answer that, I simply don't know the mind of God. But what I do know is that many of the crisis' in our lives or the challenges we face have the potential of altering our lives and the lives of others, and they demand from those of us who desire to follow Christ that we turn to God to seek answers.

We are in such a crisis today. Our country is preparing to strike an attack on Iraq, and this action has the potential to change history and the world as we know it. It is a complicated and perplexing situation that for many of us is overwhelming. It is difficult to keep the facts straight, and unfortunately the media doesn't help. In a syndicated column published in the Tribune last week, Molly Ivins writes, "according to a poll conducted by the NY Times and CBS, 42% of Americans believe Saddam Hussein of Iraq was personally responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center, something that has never even been claimed by the Bush administration." There is so much at stake here and we need to understand the facts and decipher the truth as best we can. What we decide to do as a nation, what we chose in the coming days ahead, will determine how we move into our future. What we face is a matter of life and death: for the people of Iraq, for the people of the US who will be a part of the military action, and for the unforeseeable others that will be affected as a consequence of the action we take. We are walking on sacred ground when we face decisions about life and death. And we must recognize that our relationship with God is involved. Our full presence and attention is called upon. And how will we respond? Will we say, "Here I am." Will we take up our cross and make moral based decisions, or will we protect our interests? As followers of Christ, as believers in God and the way of Love, we must consider alternatives to violence and war. Will we, at the very least, listen to the positions of our spiritual leaders who take seriously the dictates of "Just War," and seek to form and support a faithful response to this crisis? I trust we are struggling to do that even now.

But even if we do, and we seek to make thoughtful and reasoned decisions based on a true desire to serve God, our choices are not clear-cut. My ethics professor at seminary repeated often that faithful, thoughtful, God-fearing Christians will come down on different sides of issues and moral dilemmas. And there are those in this very gathered community of worship that come down on all sides of this issue, with many varied opinions to support their views; with different interpretations of how "Just War Theory" applies. Our faith tradition teaches us that we must be respectful of one another even though we may differ. And yet, as a gathered community of faith we must also challenge one another as we seek moral answers, and when we disagree we must turn to God in prayer and with the hope that there is yet another way that we just don't yet see. That is the true work ahead of us, the work of thoughtful Christian Ethical decision-making. So I invite you to engage with one another in thoughtful discussion, listening first and then gently and lovingly challenging one another to test ourselves and question so that we might seek what God desires of us and what is in the best interest of the whole world. And we must educate ourselves. Available for your interest in the library are recent statements from Archbishop Rowan Williams and Our Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, both of whom stand against the proposed preemptive strike. I also have available a church publication delineating the Episcopal Statements on War and Peace. I challenge us all to become more familiar with these positions and enter into dialogue with one another, faithfully and with an awareness of the sacred ground upon which we walk. Remembering that obedience can save lives.

Amen