Spirituality
Scripture for Life



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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Today we hear the Genesis account of God's test of Abraham. Often when we think of Abraham as the man of great faith, we are remembering his leaving everything behind in order to go to the land God was preparing, in order to receive the promise that his descendants would be as uncountable as the stars. It is easier to think of that than of the day when God tested Abraham's faith by asking for Isaac.

As we read this narrative, we need to put aside our Western mindset and allow the Genesis author to lead us. The story-teller is talking about God and Abraham. This is not a story about Isaac, and focusing on him and his trauma will only lead us away from the question of the test God gave Abraham and what it tells us about the two of them.

God called to Abraham who responded, "Here I am," literally, "Behold me." On one hand, "Here I am" was the typical answer to hearing one's name called. In some cases, it carries a deeper commitment. "Behold me" could proclaim "See, I am here to do anything you command."

When Abraham said that, God did the unthinkable. The God who had led Abraham from his homeland, the God who had given him the promise of a land and progeny beyond counting said, "Take your son Isaac, the one you love, and offer him up as a holocaust." In effect, God was saying, "You gave up everything based on my promise, and I gave you the son who would fulfill that promise. Now, do you love me enough to give it all back?" Unlike Job from whom God took everything away, God asked Abraham to give it back freely, to sacrifice everything he had ever hoped for and all he had received in willing obedience to God.

Although our translations don't indicate it, God's command was gentle. God said, "Please." God made no threat about what would happen if Abraham didn't do as he was bidden. We simply hear the instruction to take Isaac, go to a place God would reveal, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Unlike prophets who protested that they were too young or speech-impaired or afraid, Abraham spoke not a word. He set out to do what he was commanded.

As we know, at the last minute, God again called. This time with an urgent "Abraham! Abraham!" In telling Abraham not to harm the boy, God said, "I know now."

We might see Abraham's test as inhuman, too great a demand. Most parents would say, "I would give my life for my child," but would balk at giving their child. The message of this story, the example of Abraham is one that has been

pondered in the Scriptures, the Christian tradition and in world literature. It leads us to the core question of discipleship: What does God ask of us? Just how sovereign is God?

In the reading from Romans, St. Paul turns this the story inside out. While Genesis asked us to ponder what God can ask of us, Paul proclaims what God offers us. When Paul says, "God did not spare his own Son," he is implicitly comparing God to Abraham. Yet, whereas Abraham's test probed how much a creature might be asked to give the sovereign God, what humanity owes ts Maker, Paul says that the God who owes us nothing sacrifices everything for us. In Paul's mind, God is the sacrifice. Genesis presented us with the test of faith: How much do we owe God, how much are we willing to give God? Paul says that God's love, God's self-giving for humanity is immeasurable and that Christ's death and resurrection are the proof of that.

Today, this reading prepares us to hear the story of the Transfiguration, and challenges us to allow our concept of God to be transformed and amplified. The dazzling appearance of Jesus on the mountain is a sign of all the good God offers us. This week's readings give us a Lenten invitation to contemplate the image of God they present. Instead of calling us to say "Here I am," God tells us "Behold me in the Son." Then, God give us the same command that came from the cloud: "Listen to him."

GENESIS 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18

The story of God's test of Abraham is a classic which asks some of the hardest questions people of faith ever encounter. What is God like? What does it mean to worship God and God alone?

The first line we hear is "God put Abraham to the test." That's not a common incident in the Hebrew Scriptures. We had heard that Israel tested God in the desert — and that was a sign of their lack of faith. In a commentary on the Book of Genesis, Walter Brueggemann asserts that this is a real test: Abraham doesn't know that it is a test, and God does not know how it will turn out. This is a test of their relationship, and each will learn from it.

When the author tells us that God's is testing Abraham, we need to let that insight guide our reading. The incident is all about God and Abraham. When we hear the story we tend to include Isaac, the servants, even Sarah. We can be appalled at Abraham's choice and wonder what Sarah thought when they left, and most of all how traumatized Isaac was. But none of that is the author's intent, and exploring those questions will not take us into the heart of the Genesis passage. It is about God and Abraham, and there's more than enough food for thought in it.

God called to Abraham, and he replied, "Here I am," or literally, "Behold me." That's a fairly common phrase in the Hebrew Scriptures which can simply indicate that the person heard their name or it can carry the full weight of saying I am really here, listening and ready to respond.

Then, in one of the most shocking and famous sentences in all of Scripture, God says "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go … offer him up as a holocaust." What kind of God would ask that? There is no doubt that God knows what is entailed; God described Isaac in three phrases that showed just how important he was. At the same time, it is an odd description. Isaac is not Abraham's only son; Isaac has an older half-brother, Ishmael, Abraham's first born whom Abraham had already given up.

The author gives us no indication of what Abraham thought. Whereas Abraham was willing and able to bargain with God when it had to do with the plan to destroy Sodom (Genesis 19), here he speaks not a word.

The Lectionary skips over some of the drama of the story, all of which is well worth reading. Where we pick it up, Abraham, Isaac and servants had been on the road until, on the third day, they arrived at God's chosen place and Abraham prepared everything for the holocaust. As he was poised to slaughter his son, the Lord's messenger intervened. It was an urgent call, "Abraham! Abraham!" One can barely imagine what it meant at that moment for Abraham to again respond "Behold me!"

Who was it that God was to behold? This was a new Abraham, more than the one who abandoned his homeland for God's promise, more than the one who begged God for a child, more than the one who received God's messengers and bargained for the life of a town. This was Abraham, the man so devoted to God, so obedient and faithful that he would

give up everything at God's command.

Now God knew who Abraham was. The man who had proclaimed his devotion to God, the one who had obeyed in years past, had proven himself to be devoted to God above all. Abraham trusted and, because of that, God gave him what he needed for a sacrifice and once again promised him everything.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Job is the person whose situation most compares to Abraham's. Job, too, was tested. He lost everything, railed against God and through it all came to a new depth of faith and trust in the God he could not understand. So, too, Abraham was a new man at the end of this ordeal. He, too, had learned the depth of his devotion to God. Obedience, trusting God and giving everything to God were more important than all the blessings he received. That's a faith that must be experienced. That depth of faith is the result of going through the trial. There is no other way.

PSALMS 116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19

There is a musical setting to Psalm 116 that begins with Verse 1 and sings: "I love the Lord, he heard my cry, and heeded every groan." In the tradition of gospel music, the accompaniment, the harmonies and drawn out phrases bring a depth of expression to each word. That sort of singing is what we need as we pray in response to what we have seen happen between God and Abraham.

We use verses from Psalm 116 as a response to the Genesis reading about the testing of Abraham. Our first line might be Abraham's explanation of his three-day walk to the place that the Lord would show him: "I believed even when I said 'I am greatly afflicted.'"

If we pray this psalm as a way to join with Abraham in his journey of faith, then the verse on which to concentrate is "O Lord, I am your servant." Praying that line invites us to examine the depth at which we mean it. Just how far are we willing to go as servants of God? Just how much will we trust God?

Finally, as we pray this psalm, we repeat the refrain, "I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living." Before we join in the chorus, we must ask ourselves if we really mean to say that. Are we prepared to move with Abraham as he replied "Here I am" each time God called? Are we ready and willing for God to call us? Do we have enough faith to say "Here I am" and to go where God would lead us, trusting only that it will be "in the land of the living"?

ROMANS 8:31b-34

In this remarkable passage, Paul compares God to Abraham. We read that God tested Abraham's faith by asking him to give up everything God had given him. Abraham proved to himself and to God that his relationship to God, listening to God and responding to God's call, was more important to him than everything else he had and was and hoped for. Isaac was Abraham's future and he was willing to sacrifice that future to be faithful to God. Although it is extreme, we recognize that as a correct description of what humanity owes to God.

Christianity goes far beyond such correctness. Abraham recognized God as sovereign, the one to be obeyed, regardless of the cost. Christianity is based on the teaching that God so loves the world that there is no limit to what God will sacrifice on our behalf. That is the inversion of ancient understandings of the gods and creatures. Yet, that is what Christianity teaches and what Paul says here. God handed his Son over for us, thus God's approach to us is to give us everything.

To underline that and put an exclamation point on it, Paul says that Christ, the one who underwent passion and death at the hands of sinful humanity, now intercedes for us. This is the God who just won't quit. Because of that Paul can say, if God is for us, who could possibly be against us?

MARK 9:2-10

Just before Jesus took his three closest disciples up the mountain, he was speaking of the time when the Son of Man would come in glory, what many refer to as the Parousia. Then, six days later, just the amount of time it took God to create the world, Jesus went up the mountain with the three disciples.

In the context of this Sunday's readings, we can't help but hear of the climb up the mountain in connection with Abraham's journey to "a height" God would show him as the place where his test would come to its climax. Like Abraham and Isaac, Jesus and the three were alone on the mountain where Jesus' identity would be revealed to them in a new way.

The images in the story of the Transfiguration refer to the history of Israel. Elijah went to a mountain, presumably expecting to meet God in overwhelming majesty only to discover that God's self-revelation came unpretentiously in the gentle breeze. Elijah appears in the Transfiguration representing the whole prophetic tradition of Israel, including God's surprising appearance.

Moses went to the mountain to meet God and to receive the commandments and the story of the Transfiguration abounds with images from Exodus. Jesus' dazzling clothing recalls how Moses' face glowed after meeting with God. The cloud is a reminder of that symbol of God's presence that led the people through their trek in the desert. Moses' presence with Jesus and Elijah obviously fills out the summary of Israel's faith: the law and the prophets. This scene on the mountain is narrated carefully to illustrate how it was the climax of salvation history: All that God had done through Moses and the prophets was coming to its fulfillment in Jesus.

As the disciples watch between terror and amazement, they hear a voice come from the cloud which confirms what a similar voice had proclaimed to Jesus at his baptism. This time the disciples hear the voice say, "This is my beloved Son," and the added command, "Listen to him."

The first half of that communication tells the disciples who Jesus is in relation to everything they know from their religious tradition. God had sent prophets, God had given the Law, and now, as Jesus would say in so many parables, God had sent his Son. The second half of the communication is the one command God gives disciples: Listen to him.

Just as the mountain where Abraham took Isaac was the place where his faith was tested and made real, Jesus is revealed on the mountain as God's last word to humanity. Jesus is the one who brings the new covenant, God's offer of life to the world. All God asks is that, like Abraham, we put our lives in God's hands by saying, "Here I am."

Planning: 2nd Sunday of Lent

By: Lawrence Mick

The elect, who are in final preparation for the Easter sacraments, will celebrate scrutinies on the next three Sundays. Many parishes may also have candidates for full communion with the Catholic church. If some of them will be received into the church on Easter or throughout the 50-day season, you may celebrate a special penitential rite with them today.

Many experts have pointed out that candidates (those already baptized in another denomination) should not automatically be folded in with catechumens (those who are not baptized). Many of them have different needs, and they are not to be held back from full communion any longer than necessary. So, the Rite of Reception into Full Communion might be celebrated at any time of the year; it is not particularly linked to Lent or Easter.

Some candidates, though already baptized, have little or no formation in Christian doctrine and living. Such people might well journey with catechumens for many months, since they need some of the same formation. When that is the case, they should still be clearly distinguished from the unbaptized, acknowledging the significance of the baptism they have already received.

This might easily lead to having some candidates ready for reception as the community observes Lent and celebrates Easter. In such cases, the penitential rite would make sense on this Sunday. The rite is found in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, beginning at #464.

So, the elect will celebrate the scrutinies and any candidates for full communion will celebrate a penitential rite. What about everybody else? How does the rest of the assembly ritualize their conversion journey? The answer, of course, is the

sacrament of reconciliation. This might be a good time to announce all the opportunities to celebrate that sacrament this Lent. Let people know when your parish will celebrate a penance service, as well as opportunities for individual celebration of the sacrament. When lisiting penance services and opportunities for confession within your own parish schedule include those of neighboring parishes, too. Some deaneries post such opportunities in the area online for anyone to consult.

Planners might review the readings and prayers that are part of the scrutinies and the penitential rite for candidates to see if they might also be used in creating the parish penance service. If your service is scheduled during the third, fourth or fifth week of Lent, the scrutiny Gospels could provide a theme, (though you would want to use the shorter form of the Gospel for a penance service). If you gather issues of concern from the community to create local adaptations of the intercessions in the scrutinies, those same concerns could shape an examination of conscience or a series of petitions during the penance service.

Prayers: 2nd Sunday of Lent

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Growing in faith and understanding is a life-long process. It is reflected in each of our personal lives, just as it was reflected within Judaism and Christianity. God's covenant with Israel was expressed in many dramatic ways to increase their understanding; and the disciples and those who followed them learned slowly who Jesus is. Lent is an opportunity to focus on who Jesus is for each of us.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you took Peter, James and John to a mountaintop: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you revealed your relationship to the Law and the prophets: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to a deeper understanding of who you are: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray that our own faith and understanding of Jesus may be strengthened during this Lenten season.

Minister For the whole church: that we may be an ever-learning community, open to God's ongoing, revealing word ... remembering your constant love, we pray,

- For those seeking to enter into or more deeply engage in the church, and for all who have questions of faith ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For a new and deeper understanding of how our faith compels us to act on behalf of the poor and marginalized, the persecuted and the suffering ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For those whose deepened faith has been expressed at great personal cost: for contemporary martyrs, courageous witnesses, and all persecuted Christians ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For those preparing to celebrate the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and Eucharist ... remembering your constant love, we pray,
- For all the church's teachers, preachers and theologians who continue to stretch and challenge our understanding ... remembering your constant love, we pray,

Presider Gracious God, you revealed yourself to us throughout history and most especially through your beloved Son. Open our hearts and minds to understand you and Jesus even more deeply during this Lenten season. We ask this in his holy name. Amen.

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