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"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7).

Second Sunday of Lent

Gen 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Ps 116; Rom 8:31b-34; Mark 9:2-10

Today's readings set up a disturbing parallel between the story of Abraham's near tragic sacrifice of Isaac, his only son and heir to the promise, and the scene where Jesus is transfigured before he goes to Jerusalem to be sacrificed on the cross to fulfill the Law and Prophets. The question at issue was posed for me once in a poem someone shared in which God, after intervening to save Isaac, is asked what He would do if He had a son. Isaac is spared; Jesus is not.

Jesus' obedience to his *Abba* and his understanding of the role of the mysterious Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 moves him to offer his life as a ransom to set us free from the power of sin and death. He dies so that we might live. By his stripes we are healed. By his blood we are saved. The Lamb of God is slain at Passover to make possible our Exodus to freedom. The breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup at Eucharist are signs of the death that gave us life. Baptism plunges us into his death so we might rise with him by his resurrection.

These scriptural metaphors are the basis for numerous theologies to explain the idea of redemption, but they inevitably deliver us to a difficult place in our relationship with God. Why would God require or allow such terrible suffering and death by Jesus to be the cost of our salvation? What cost had to be paid and to whom to rebalance the universe between God's justice and mercy: justice to hold sin accountable; mercy to waive the penalty in order to forgive the sinner?

What remains as theological residue in the Catholic imagination is the feeling that God is still putting us to the test like Abraham, asking us to do difficult things and make painful sacrifices to show our obedience. People endure suffering thinking God has sent it, so there is no consolation or relief in prayer. The God Jesus taught us to love and trust is distanced from us by the hard logic of this dilemma. How can God be both the source of our pain and the balm for its healing?

These questions are why Lent is desert time and a place of desolation. Jesus went there for 40 days to be among the beasts and the angels to grapple precisely with these questions: Who is God and what is God asking of me? Satan's goal was to turn Jesus away from, even against, God. Instead, Jesus resisted temptation and renewed his trust in the One who had called him "my beloved Son" at his baptism. He then set a course for Jerusalem to fulfill the Scriptures because he believed that love is what redeems the world. Lent invites us to decide if we still want to go with him.

I urge readers to read Mary McGlone's exegesis of today's readings to find fuller context and insight into these questions.

<https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/scripture-life/second-sunday-lent-knowing-god>

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