

June 28, 2026  
Proper 8A  
Trinity, St. Louis  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Genesis 22:1-14*

*Psalm 13*

*Romans 6:12-23*

*Matthew 10:40-42*

In the Name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

One of the mixed blessings of the lectionary this time of year is the chance to discover anew the intergenerational story arcs in the Hebrew Scriptures. Last week, we heard about the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. Today, we have the story of the binding of Isaac.

The idea that God would demand that Abraham sacrifice his own son is so terrifying to us that the compilers of the current lectionary removed this passage from the Good Friday liturgy, relegating it to one of the options at the Great Vigil. It raises many questions – difficult questions – including who would want to worship a God who makes such outrageous demands?

The question of why we face hardship, why we suffer, why we are tested, and who does that testing is as old as human thought. It is a question with which every religious or philosophical system wrestles. Ours is no different.

The story of Abraham and Isaac brings to mind a Yiddish folk tale that goes something like this: Why didn't God send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? It's because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, "If you want to command death, do it yourself."

The tale rings true. After all, how could even an angel of the Lord be willing to demand that Abraham slaughter, like a sacrificial lamb, the longed-for son that he and Sarah had been granted in their old age?

But, like it or not, this story, and other difficult texts, are part of our sacred scripture, facets of God that are revealed to us in the Bible. For most of us in the Episcopal Church, ignoring these texts is something of a lifelong devotional practice. It is much, much easier to look away than to confront the painful reality of such hard texts, isn't it?

How are we supposed to reconcile the violence in the Bible with the idea of a loving God? We tend to concentrate on the passages where God is depicted as loving, as nurturing, and caring. But this, I think, is unrealistic, maybe even sentimental.

There is violence, and all manner of bad decision making, in the Bible because the Bible tells us at least as much about ourselves and the world in which we live as it tells us about God. (And, yes, you can tell the Bishop that I said that.)

There are, of course, others who call themselves Christians who continue to weaponize violent passages to oppress and condemn those who are not like them, who disagree with them, whom they consider to be un-chosen, even un-human.

The story of Isaac and his father is hard to read, but closing our eyes doesn't make it go away. So, let's peek. At least for a moment or two.

The Rabbinic tradition catalogues ten trials by which God tested Abraham. The story we hear today, what Jews call the "*akedah*", or the binding of Isaac, is the last of these ten trials, and has provoked fierce theological debate since its first telling.

Is it a story of a cruel and abusive God? Is it about a gullible father and his naïve son? Is it a story of extreme religious violence? Given the ending, is the whole point a condemnation of child sacrifice, and the notion that children were the property of the father? Or is it simply a mythic tale about the challenge of faith and obedience to God's will? And, what might have happened if God had asked Sarah first?

For Christians, the layers get more complicated. Theologians have long read the story of the Binding of Isaac as a foreshadowing of the Crucifixion of Jesus. We even call the story "The Sacrifice of Isaac." Both narratives feature a loving father sacrificing his "only beloved son" on a mountain in the region of Moriah, now known as Jerusalem, to fulfill a divine plan.

Looking back to last week, and how God saved Ishmael, it is fascinating to me that the three Abrahamic religions choose the same geographical spot, the Temple Mount, or *Haram al-Sharif*, to commemorate the binding of Isaac, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the ascension of the Prophet Mohammed.

Is your head spinning yet? These are only some of the questions sparked by this uncomfortable, and important, story. For the moment, the preaching point I want to make is that that trusting in God is not always easy. From what our stories tell us, it never has been. After all, having faith is not the same as knowing for sure. And we, God's children, have always wanted to know everything ... for sure ... right now.

I am reminded of a story about the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish nun, St. Teresa of Ávila (1515-82). It is said that one day, making her way to her convent during a fierce rainstorm, she slipped down an embankment and fell squarely into the mud. The irrepressible nun looked up to heaven and admonished her Maker, "If this is how You treat Your friends, it's no wonder You have so few of them!"

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Trusting that we will find a forum to wrestle further with the story of the Binding of Isaac and other difficult texts, let us turn to another story about being called to follow – Jesus' discussion of discipleship.

In contrast to the Genesis passage, sitting with today's gospel lesson felt a little like Gertrude Stein's reference to her childhood home in Oakland, "there is no there there."<sup>1</sup> Compared to last week's predictions of inter-family strife, suffering and persecution, it felt a little tepid, even blasé.

And then the last line jumped out at me. Jesus says, "and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple — truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

We often imagine discipleship as requiring huge sacrifice or involving great feats of derring-do. Sometimes, of course, that is exactly what discipleship entails, as in the lives and martyrdom of Peter & Paul, whose combined feast is tomorrow.

But at other times, Jesus seems to say, discipleship is nothing more than giving "even a cup" of cold water to one in need. Or offering a hug to someone who is grieving. Or a listening ear to someone in need of a friend. Or offering a ride to someone without a car. Or volunteering to feed the hungry. Or...you get the idea.

Discipleship doesn't always have to be heroic. Think about the relationships that are the most important to you, and how small acts of devotion, or tenderness, or forgiveness, things that often go unnoticed, serve as the vessel that protects those relationships. In the same way, the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures.

Except that, according to Jesus, there are no small gestures. Think of it like the butterfly effect. Anything done in faith and love has an untold impact, both on the ones involved and for the world God loves.

Perhaps you've heard Loren Eiseley's story of "the star thrower" — the one about the guy tossing starfish after starfish into the sea. When someone asks him why, he replies that if they don't get back in the water soon, they'll dry out and die. Looking at a beach strewn with thousands of starfish, the other person tells him that he can't possibly hope to make any difference. To which he says — and this is famous closing line — "To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world."

Just so. Because Jesus has promised to come in time to redeem all in love, to fix all that is broken, to heal all hurts, and to wipe the tears from every eye, we can in the meantime devote ourselves to acts of mercy and deeds of compassion small and large. Our task is not to save the world — Jesus has promised to do that! And that promise sets us free. Free to care for the little corner of the world in which we have been placed.

On this Pride Sunday, let's consider the countless decisions we make every day, and commit ourselves to welcome. Not fear, not judgement, not violence, not vengeance, not retribution, not aggression, not terror — but welcome, acceptance and love.

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937).

Because we are all created in the image of God, we are free to make choices, free to choose love, free to create, free to live in harmony, free to reason, free to vote, for goodness' sake.

Of course, free will being free, there's a flip side. We are also free to hate, free to kill, free to foster discord, and free to deny the good sense God has given us. This week, I received a voice mail from an anonymous angry man who said, "just stop feeding those people and they'll figure it out."

Is this God testing us, or is it the world? I don't think it matters. What does matter, my dear friends in Christ, if even a cup of cold water can make a huge and unexpected difference in the world, just imagine what a baloney sandwich, or a head of cabbage, or a can of beans, or bowl of soup made with creativeness and love, or a delicious cake does to be faithful to our call to care for our neighbors who are as we are.

And if that is true for feeding bodies, the same is also true for greeting, and welcoming, and embracing the physical bodies of God's beloved Queer children whom others have denied, oppressed, and rejected for their identity and gender expression. The struggles of those who suffer deprivation, discrimination and hatred reveal to us the kingdom of God.

There is a saying from the Talmud that reminds us that "whoever saves one life saves the world entire." Every act of compassion, no matter the size, makes the world a better place, and gladdens the heart of God.

So, with the Psalmist, let us sing to the Lord, who has dealt with us richly, and praise the Name of the Lord Most High. Amen.