



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, CANON FOR CATHEDRAL RELATIONS  
THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 8, JUNE 28, 2020  
GENESIS 22:1-14; PSALM 13; ROMANS 6:12-23; MATTHEW 10:40-42

## TELLING IT AND TRUSTING IT

**Genesis 22:1-14** *[God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.*

*When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."]*

Back in ancient times, around 2009, I was in the seminary in Berkeley, California, and I was trying to discern what my call – my actual job – as a priest was meant to be. Because one thing I knew for sure: I did not want to work in a parish! *And don't think I don't hear you laughing; and You, too!*

But this was over a decade ago, and my spiritual director, Sarah, was walking with me through this discernment. Sarah had a disheveled little

room in the attic of a friend's house. It had a wall of slanted windows, and I would sit there looking at her, but also over her shoulder, out onto rooftops and treetops and sometimes sunsets. It was a funky space, yet with a calming sense. And I needed calming, because I was really agitated with feeling so drawn to be a priest, but so unsure of what work I was called to. And Sarah asked me, "Would you want Jesus to just appear in the room and tell you?"

And I said, “YES! That would be great!” And she said, “People are often afraid of what God might ask of them.” But I felt so sure that I would **want** to be TOLD.

Perhaps a better Bible scholar than I would have been less eager. You know, being called into service by God is not exactly a plum job in the Bible. Moses gasped and said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Jonah jumped on a boat going the other way when God said, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it.”

And these are well after Abraham’s time. He is called the Father of Israel; he is the patriarch of patriarchs. None of their stories would be told, if Abraham had not joined into covenant with God, when God said, “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.*” A hard thing to do!

But the promise was: *I will make of you a great nation.*”

And so Abraham trusted and went, and years and adventures and misadventures later, finally, a son, Isaac, is born to him and Sarah in their old age. And then, in today’s reading, Abraham heard God call again, and Abraham answered: “**You want me to do WHAT?**”

Well – that’s not how the Bible records it, is it?

When God says, “Take your only son whom you love, and go sacrifice him as a burnt offering,” we hear no words in answer from Abraham. Just the narrative that early the next morning he got up and loaded his donkey and took Isaac and two servants and set out.

How is Abraham to be the father of a nation if he is to sacrifice his only son? How is God going to do that?

Abraham doesn’t know. We don’t know how God is going to be God. So we explore, and tell, our experience of God the best we can.

Imagine you have brought your unchurched friend to Saint Mark’s today, and you are so excited to share something of your Christian tradition and faith, and your friend sitting beside you takes in the majesty of these towering pillars and colorful windows, and listens with a smile to that lovely organ prelude. And then our lector reads aloud today’s passage from the Bible... and it is the story of Abraham and Isaac.

Abraham – eyes welling and knife trembling in his hand over the throat of his beloved son – and *you* suddenly feel kind of agitated and glance side-eyed at your friend, knowing **God is making a bad impression!** And you wonder: “How am I going to explain what God is up to?”

I know I feel agitated, too – about this passage from Genesis and, frankly, lots of things in the Bible. Interacting with God in the world is not an easy business, and describing that interaction defies precise words. But these are our holy scriptures; these are the stories of our ancestors’ own seeking of God and articulating their experience, in their own time and culture, of their encounter with our timeless, limitless God.

They wrestled with their experience of relationship with God. There is a chapter about Abraham’s grandson Jacob *physically* wrestling with God, right? Abraham himself wrestled with what relationship would **mean** with one

God, in the midst of a polytheistic culture that practiced child sacrifice. What covenant with one God entailed, what faith *required* of him – and what it blessed him with.

Does that wrestling feel maybe not just ancient, but... familiar? Has anyone here wrestled with your relationship with God, wondered about what your faith means? I might rather ask...has anyone NOT?

And so we have Abraham and Isaac and this chapter of the Bible that begins with the hard words, “God tested Abraham.” And there are volumes and volumes of deep thought and reasoning you can read through trying to find a palatable interpretation of this unsettling story of God telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Thoughts like:

-- Isaac was not a child, but already young man, and so he was a willing participant in this human sacrifice through his *own* faith; he carried the heavy wood up the mountain and there’s no mention of struggle. And so, that’s *okay*?

-- Or that Abraham knew all along that God wouldn’t have him go through with it, knew there would be a ram to sacrifice... He had told his servants “Wait here, WE’LL be back.”

-- And certainly there is a ton of analysis on the *literal* narrative itself: God gave Abraham the ultimate “test of obedience,” and Abraham passed, and the rest is history.

It’s easier to ascribe our own limited human intentions to God; we can digest them, and then point to them for all the vicissitudes of life. But God is not that simple! In the Jewish midrash tradition, where myriad

interpretations and extrapolations of holy texts are hashed out, they say there is more midrash on this story of Abraham and Isaac than any other! There are layers and layers of meaning, starting with the ancient culture that wrote them down – through interpretations of millennia of cultures since, all exploring and trying to articulate their relationship with the God they experienced, with the God WE experience, through the lens of our shared ancient stories. We wrestle *with* them!

When we wrestle with this Scripture, with any difficult Scripture, consider, what is some truth in this Bible passage – regardless of whether it is accurate historical fact or not – that brings me somewhere in relating to God’s interacting with creation, interacting with all of us, interacting with ME. How does it speak to my own seeking for more of God, to my **trust**, that is at the core of my being, at the core of my intangible, elusive experience of the Divine, my trust that God loves me?

And there it is for my hearing today: TRUST.

When God calls to us and something in us responds, we don’t know how that’s going to play out. We don’t know how God is going to be God. Our world, just like Abraham’s, has many trials and unbearably hard decisions to make, and sometimes we really wonder where God is in the midst of it. So we are left... to trust. Is this story of Abraham and Isaac a *perfect* allegory for that, since in this telling, from this cultural lens, God initiates the ordeal? I don’t feel it so, in my own experience. It’s problematic; that’s why people of faith have been wrestling with this text for millennia.

But is there *something* here about our growing relationship with God in this story of Abraham? From my own learning and seeking of Jesus, from my own experience of the Divine, I don't feel that torment like that is God's will. But I do know that unbearable situations, unbearable pain happen, because I've been trembling on that mountain with Abraham – and so have you, in your own version of it.

If the worst possible thing happened, if it looked like all the promise of life was ruined, would I still believe God held me? Would I still **trust** God? This story of Abraham from our ancient past is how one people described their sense of wrestling with that question, and God proving trustworthy to God's covenant. Another people more than a thousand years later, probably from the Babylonian captivity, lamented in today's Psalm 13, "How long, O Lord" when they faced such trials, and concluded with the aspirational hope: "But I put my **trust** in your mercy; my heart is joyful because of your saving help." And to this day, we still cry out with the Psalms.

Half a millennium later, another people described how they heard of Jesus in his hardest time praying: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." And that same Jesus, in today's Gospel: "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."

All of these eras landing somehow on trusting where God is going! Do we land on that trust in our generation? What is our story with Jesus

today, that future generations will look back and say, "How did they act with trust in God when their church buildings were closed and they were confronted with a virulent pandemic, and the explosion of protest around systemic racial injustice? When they couldn't visit loved ones dying in the hospital, but leaders made caring for each other's safety a political divide instead of a community norm? I don't know. But we are writing that story right now!

And we DO know something that is keeping us together and giving us hope. We know Jesus, because he walked beside us. So we trust that when the worst things are happening, God is still with us, and expecting something from us! So even when we don't understand how God is being Godself, we continue to wrestle – not just with our holy books, but with our own seeking of God, and responding to God's call in community. It's the wrestling that helps us respond – and all eras point to trust.

Because there are things that we know and trust in. We know whoever gives even a cup of cold water – the meagerest of gifts – welcomes Jesus. We know we ARE called to that, and we continue to tell and trust that story.

The last line of my favorite Jane Kenyon poem goes: *I am the one whose love overcomes you, already with you when you think to call my name.*

In living as followers of Jesus, that presence and imperative of God's love **is** what we trust.