

## HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

Sunday, 28 February 2021

- Fr. Jim Fredericks

Part One: the readings for the day

Part Two: reflection on the readings

Part Three: guidelines for *lectio divina*

### PART ONE: READINGS FOR THE DAY

Lectionary: 26

#### Reading I [Gn 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18](#)

God put Abraham to the test.

He called to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am!" he replied.

Then God said:

"Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love,  
and go to the land of Moriah.

There you shall offer him up as a holocaust  
on a height that I will point out to you."

When they came to the place of which God had told him,  
Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it.

Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.

But the LORD's messenger called to him from heaven,  
"Abraham, Abraham!"

"Here I am!" he answered.

"Do not lay your hand on the boy," said the messenger.

"Do not do the least thing to him.

I know now how devoted you are to God,  
since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son."

As Abraham looked about,  
he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket.

So he went and took the ram  
and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son.

Again the LORD's messenger called to Abraham from heaven and said:

"I swear by myself, declares the LORD,  
that because you acted as you did

in not withholding from me your beloved son,

I will bless you abundantly

and make your descendants as countless

as the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore;

your descendants shall take possession

of the gates of their enemies,  
and in your descendants all the nations of the earth  
shall find blessing—  
all this because you obeyed my command.”

**Responsorial Psalm [116:10, 15, 16-17, 18-19](#)**

R. (116:9) I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.  
I believed, even when I said,

“I am greatly afflicted.”

Precious in the eyes of the LORD  
is the death of his faithful ones.

R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.

O LORD, I am your servant;

I am your servant, the son of your handmaid;  
you have loosed my bonds.

To you will I offer sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and I will call upon the name of the LORD.

R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.

My vows to the LORD I will pay

in the presence of all his people,

In the courts of the house of the LORD,  
in your midst, O Jerusalem.

R. I will walk before the Lord, in the land of the living.

**Reading II [Rom 8:31b-34](#)**

Brothers and sisters:

If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own Son

but handed him over for us all,

how will he not also give us everything else along with him?

Who will bring a charge against God’s chosen ones?

It is God who acquits us, who will condemn?

Christ Jesus it is who died—or, rather, was raised—

who also is at the right hand of God,

who indeed intercedes for us.

**Verse Before the Gospel [Cf. Mt 17:5](#)**

From the shining cloud the Father’s voice is heard:

This is my beloved Son, listen to him.

### Gospel [Mk 9:2-10](#)

Jesus took Peter, James, and John  
and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves.  
And he was transfigured before them,  
and his clothes became dazzling white,  
such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.  
Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses,  
and they were conversing with Jesus.  
Then Peter said to Jesus in reply,  
“Rabbi, it is good that we are here!  
Let us make three tents:  
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”  
He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.  
Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;  
from the cloud came a voice,  
“This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”  
Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone  
but Jesus alone with them.  
As they were coming down from the mountain,  
he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone,  
except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.  
So they kept the matter to themselves,  
questioning what rising from the dead meant.

### **PART TWO: A HOMILY ON THE READINGS**

The Church gives us a very difficult reading today: The Sacrifice of Isaac.

This seems appropriate, given the fact that we are on a Lenten journey, trying to find our way through the desert, to the Cross on Good Friday and to the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter Sunday.

Today’s story comes from the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Torah. The ancient Rabbis knew what they were doing when they decided to include this even more ancient memory of the Jewish people in the Torah.

I need to say, at the beginning of this homily, that the Church has not given us this story lightly. It is a difficult story and there is always a temptation to pass over it in silence as an unnecessary bother or some anomaly that can be ignored. We need to let this ancient story grab hold of our souls and lead us deeper into Lent’s desert and to places we might not want to go.

The story begins with God putting Abraham “to the test.” He called to him by name,

“Abraham!”

“Here I am!” he replied.

As with Adam in the Garden of Eden, God has come in search of his creature. But unlike Adam, Abraham does not hide from his Creator, ashamed of his nakedness. Instead, with “fear and trembling,” Abraham answers back to God words that are, in my view, the most difficult words a human being can utter to any other person:

“Here I am!”

Abraham, the first Jew, knows little about this God of the desert who addresses him. Sometime before this encounter, God called out to Abraham, a landless migrant worker, with the command to leave his father’s house and set off into the desert “for a land I will show you.” At that time, God promised to make of Abraham a great nation and settle his progeny (the Jewish people) in their own land.

And Abraham, saying nothing, set out into the desert in the obedience of faith.

Later, Abraham called out to his God, asking, How can your promise be fulfilled? I have no child. And the Lord blessed Abraham with a son, Isaac. This is when the story of the sacrifice of Isaac begins.

Then God said to Abraham.

“Take your son, Isaac, your only one, whom you love,  
and go to the land of Moriah.

There you shall offer him up as a holocaust  
on a height that I will point out to you.”

The story is carefully told. Abraham is not commanded to sacrifice a prize goat or a sheep. Instead, he is to sacrifice

“Your only son, Isaac, whom you love.”

And certainly, Abraham must love Isaac. Isaac is the only tangible sign Abraham has that this desert-God can be trusted to fulfill His promises. Without Isaac, Abraham’s faith in God is in vain.

Abraham then shows us why he must be revered as the Father of Faith.

Once again, Abraham sets out into the desert in silence and in obedience to what God has commanded.

So Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, while he himself carried the fire and the knife.

Abraham says nothing to Sarah, his wife and the mother of the boy. He says nothing to the boy. What words does Abraham have to tell out what God has demanded? When Abraham finally does speak, he speaks with an irony that is both poignant and terrifying.

As the father and son walk on together, Isaac speaks respectfully to his father, saying,

“Father!” he said. “Here I am,” Abraham replied.

Then, the child asks,

“Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”

And then comes one of the most terrifying examples of irony in the history of all the world’s literature.

“My son,” Abraham answered, “God will provide for himself a victim.”

When Abraham and Isaac reach the land of Moriah, Abraham builds an altar atop a mountain peak and arranges the wood on it. And then he obeys the command of God.

Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.

This story, of course, does not end in the death of Isaac. As Abraham begins to bring the knife down upon his son, an angel of the Lord descends to earth and stays Abraham’s hand.

Isaac is spared.

This is point in the story where the philosophers, the theologians and, of course, the preachers, furiously begin to tell lies about Abraham and his terrifying faith in God. Read the commentaries. Listen to the preachers. They will tell you that this story is really about ending the ancient practice of child sacrifice. It’s a story with a moral: don’t sacrifice your first born son to the gods.

Read the commentaries. Listen to the preachers. The God we know and love would never demand such a thing of one of his creatures. The drama is all for show. At the end of the tale, the angel appears as a *deus ex machina* and everything ends well for Isaac and for Abraham as well.

I will have none of this. Or almost none of it.

I suspect that, in oral form, long before the Rabbis wrote it down as part of the Book of Genesis, this story was a morality tale about the evil of child sacrifice. And the moral of the story is that Abraham's God, unlike the gods worshiped by the Gentiles, does not demand the sacrifice of the first-born child.

But the Rabbi's took this earlier version of the story and retold it for their own purposes.

And what was their purpose?

The rabbis wanted to impress on us a difficult teaching: The demands that faith in the Living God puts on us can be, at times, dreadful.

We are weak and fragile creatures. And yet God calls us out into the desert, as he called out Abraham: "leave your father's house for a land that I will show you."

As your priest, I am witness to this drama of faith when I bury your loved ones and when I hear your confessions. I am witness to this drama of faith when the alcoholic, in fear and trembling, sets aside his bottle and says to God what Abraham said:

"Here I am!"

I am a witness to this drama of faith when our young LGBT people "come out" to their families and, in fear and trembling, say,

"Here I am."

In faith, we are called to set out into the desert in obedience to a God who utterly transcends our ability to understand. Remember poor Job, the man who lost everything? Job's friends told him to curse God and die so that his miserable life might end.

And to this, Job said,

"Even though He slay me, even still will I trust in Him."

This is the difficult teaching in the story of Abraham and Isaac in the land of Moriah.

Christians call this story "the Sacrifice of Isaac." But the ancient Rabbis gave the story a different name. They call this story the *Akedah*. *Akedah* means, "binding." It refers to Abraham's binding of Isaac, hands and feet, for the holocaust.

But the Rabbis meant much more than this.

The binding refers to Abraham as well. In the obedience of faith, Abraham has been bound forever to the uncontrollable Mystery of the God who calls out to us in the desert and commands us to do what is impossible.

Since it is not just Isaac who is bound, but Abraham as well, and since it is not just Abraham who has been bound, but Abraham's children, the Jewish people, then perhaps we can begin to understand Elie Wiesel's famous observation about the Nazis and their infamous crime against the Jewish people. Wiesel spoke of the "final solution" not as a "genocide," but as the *Shoah*.

I'm convinced that he was thinking of Father Abraham when he said this. *Shoah* means "holocaust" or "burnt offering." Isaac was to be offered up to God as a *shoah*.

But in the end, it was Abraham himself who is offered up as a *shoah*. He is the Father of Faith because of his obedience to the incomprehensible God.

The Gospel for today is the story of the Transfiguration. Like the sacrifice of Isaac, the Transfiguration of Jesus, when his clothes become "dazzling white," takes place on a mountain top.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves.

Before we can be transfigured with the Risen Lord at Easter, we must first, like Abraham, sojourn across the desert with all that we love and there, in fear and trembling, offer our lives to the Lord as a burnt offering.

### **PART THREE: INSTRUCTIONS FOR *LECTIO DIVINA***

I suggest that you use the readings and my reflections as an opportunity for practicing *lectio divina* ("divine reading"). This is an ancient spiritual practice that started with the great monks in the Syrian and Egyptian desert back in the early days of the Church. It is really quite simple.

Step one: calm your mind (my Buddhist friends describe the mind as "a mango-tree full of chattering monkeys"). I find that paying attention to your breath for a few minutes is a practical and effective way to do this.

Step two: read the readings slowly and attentively. Savor the words as if you were tasting a great Pinot Noir. Don't rush. You are not looking for information or instructions. You are making friends with a sacred text which will bless you abundantly if you will only open your heart to it and let it speak to you. In *lectio divina*, we are not actually "reading" the Bible. Rather, we are "listening" to the Bible as the sacred words speak to us.

Step three: repeat step two.

Step four: read the reflection on the readings.

Step five: Ask yourself a few questions:

- What particular words in the readings call out to me most forcefully?
- What is going on in my life such that these words call to me so forthrightly?
- How am I being asked to change, both interiorly and exteriorly?
- In light of this *lectio divina*, how am I being invited to be of service to the world today?