

Proper 8 A July 2, 2017

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6: 12-23; Matthew 10: 40-42

St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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The year was 1996....Denver, Colorado...Twenty-one years ago. Our oldest daughter, a juvenile onset, brittle diabetic, eight months pregnant, was in extreme crisis. Knowing it could be her only pregnancy, Hadley and Scott were elated, but now, early in the eighth month, both mother and unborn baby were critical; both of their hearts were severely compromised. It was a touch and go, life and death situation.

Just off the plane from Boston, I was terrified and sickened by the doctors' grim update; survival for both hung in the balance. Without caring one whit for what anyone in the Rose Memorial Hospital waiting room thought, I lay prostrate on the floor and began bargaining with God for mercy, unwilling to sacrifice our child, nor the unborn baby. Who was I with so many pleas from others to beg from the depths of my soul, yet, I said "Here I am". I promised God that I would go anywhere, serve anyplace he sent me, no matter how much I hated it, but God had to save BOTH Hadley and her son...not one or the other...but both. Sacrifice was non-negotiable.

Soon both monitors sounded desperate alarms; the medical team said heart failure was imminent, and regardless of risk, they had to move immediately with an emergency caesarean. OUR hearts were in our mouths. Sometime later, before Tom and I could even commence praying, our son-in-law, Scott, came in holding his very small but perfectly formed son, Matthew. Our rejoicing was tempered, of course, by waiting for news of Hadley. Hadley made it through a risky surgery; by Grace, there was no sacrifice. God had done his part, then there was mine, obedience to serve him wherever and whatever the call.

The Genesis reading, the literary and theological climax to the story of Abraham, is both poignant and horrifying. We're touched deeply, no doubt, by the pathos and moving portrayal of Abraham's ultimate act of faithful obedience to God. Although you and I know the outcome, in watching the divine/human drama unfold, we have to come to terms with the issues it naturally raises. This reading must be placed within the larger narrative in which God had promised heirs through Isaac as numerous as the stars in the sky, a blessing to the world. But, you know, Abraham, the patriarch, is in each of us. We too are called to overcome cowardice and fear, to trust in God's

ultimate love and promises. After what must have been a torturous journey with Isaac, Abraham needed to fully live into his words to God: “Here I am.”

We modern readers understand the proposed sacrifice of Isaac as a test, but Abraham doesn’t know how it will evolve. Abraham’s entire life had been marked by his journey to a place he did not know, into a future he did not always understand, all the while trusting that God would reveal the destination and demonstrate how to get there. And in today’s Hebrew Scripture we see Abraham still traveling, this time toward a future fraught with overwhelming uncertainty and threatening possibility of an unthinkable ending.

What is God asking? Why would God, after the promise of descendents numbered like the stars, take it all back? Why would God turn Abraham’s settled world completely upside down? And, how do we live our lives if we cannot fully hold on to the promises of God as written in Holy Scripture? How can you and I follow a God who can call us to a constant state of journey into an unknown future; who would ask the impossible to show us the possible; who works in ways that go way beyond what our finite minds can comprehend?

You and I, like Abraham, can either too easily conclude that only our own sight, that only our own understanding of circumstances and events is the total reality. Or we can trust that God sees and knows what we can't; that God intends things for blessing, not curse, for the spiritual life, not death. The decision is ours; and therein lies the test, to willingly detour from what we thought was the obvious and right direction.

Abraham drives deep into the heart of our own insecurities and subsequent attempts to control. We want to live by sight controlling the promise, a God who would never call us into uncertainty and ambiguity; we want a safe God and a safely managed world. We want a God who exists within our finite thinking, a known, domesticated God controllable by our creeds and systematic theology, but that is a god created in our image. But, the true God is the One who so loved us sinners that he gave his only begotten Son to be the sacrifice for the whole world, the salvation for all people, and so we are called, yes, called to worship and follow the God who sees what we cannot, a God who tests to strengthen, but in so doing comes the promise of provision.

The journey of being a Christian may not be what we thought at the outset; it may take us into circumstances we cannot control; into unspeakable personal tragedy; but we are to base our choices on “the conviction of things not seen”.

We are to journey into the unknown assured the path has been seen before by God. This is sobering, this genuine, intimate relationship with God, but as our first hymn says, we can rely on the “faith of our fathers, living still”...the faith of our spiritual and national forefathers and foremothers.

On June 10, 1996, the day Matthew, which means “gift of God”, was born, Colorado’s hockey team won their first Stanley Cup in triple overtime.

Hadley still has the miniature silver Stanley Cup we gave to congratulate THEIR triple overtime victory by God’s grace-filled hand. As for the story of my bargain with God, I was soon called to leave my beloved first call as a priest at Trinity, Copley Square, Boston...journeys to Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Darien, Southport, Richmond, Hartford, Stafford Springs, and now St. John’s. I could never imagine these places God has called but as the line from Robert Frost’s famous poem states:”and I, I took the road less traveled and that has made all the difference.” Amen.