

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 3/12/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Genesis 22:1-14

A few weeks ago, a notice was posted on the photo board in the parish hall that invited parishioners of all ages to submit questions, anonymously, about anything related to our faith or our religious tradition. The plan was that I, and then your new rector, would respond to these questions, to the best of our ability, in upcoming newsletters.

At the end of coffee hour last Sunday, I checked the little bag underneath the notice, where the pad of paper awaits your questions. There were four slips of paper with an excellent question on each. One of those questions relates to today's lesson from the book of Genesis. The question is this: What's the deal with "fearing God?"

Toward the end of today's reading from Genesis, after Abraham has shown God that he is willing to sacrifice the life of his son, Isaac, at God's command, God affirms Abraham with these words: "Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Indeed, what's the deal with "fearing God?" Does fearing God mean needing to prove one's faith by being willing to carry out such an act?

If there's ever a lectionary reading after which it's difficult to respond: "Thanks be to God," this is probably it. This story raises so many questions for us: Is the God that we worship the same one who appears in this story, asking the impossible of Abraham? How could Abraham, no matter how obedient and trusting in God, be willing to carry out such a command? How can we relate to this story? Its content and details are so disturbing. They don't fit into our framework of life in and with God.

In order to get at why this story is an important one within the Judeo-Christian tradition, and where it might hold truth within it for us today, we have to set our feelings aside. We need to look at the story in its broader context, and we need to try to enter its ancient world, which is completely foreign to us.

Today's text from Genesis comes at the end of the story of Abraham. It's crucial to understand how this story begins. Years and years before, Abraham had been instructed by God to leave his country and his people and to go to a land that God would show him. God was asking Abraham to trust God above and beyond all else. God was asking Abraham to cast his lot with God alone, by cutting off his past and everything that had previously defined him – his home, his family, his land – and by walking with God into a completely unknown future.

Through this obedience, God promised, God would make a great nation of Abraham and his descendents, and through him and his future family the whole world would be blessed. By entering into this covenant with God, Abraham would be risking everything he held dear. He chose to take that risk, and to claim God's promise.

The story continues through lots of chapters with many adventures. But years later, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, by then elderly, still have no children. What is Abraham, who has risked everything, to make of God's part in this covenant? How can God possibly fulfill God's promise when it is now humanly impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have children? The story takes a miraculous and delightful turn when Sarah, at age 90, finally gives birth to their son, Isaac. Sarah and Abraham learn that in God, there is hope, even when all human hope is gone.

Then we come to today's passage. Some time later, when Isaac is probably around twelve years old, God tests Abraham. At the beginning of Abraham's relationship with God, God had asked Abraham to sacrifice his past. Now, God is asking Abraham to surrender his future as well, represented by Isaac, through whom all of God's promises of descendants, land, and blessing would be realized. The point of this most disturbing portion of the story isn't whether or not God has any right to make such a request of Abraham, or whether or not Abraham is out of his mind to obey. The author of this ancient story isn't concerned with the questions that so occupy and distress us. The point here is that, once again in the story, Abraham has the opportunity to learn that in God, there is hope, even when all human hope is gone.

That's the fear of God. The fear of God isn't the emotion of being afraid of God. The fear of God isn't an intellectual acknowledgement of God's power, which leads one to tread reverently but cautiously around God, keeping a safe and respectful distance. The fear of God is total and complete engagement with God, such that everything in one's life expresses the reality that God is the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all that is. The fear of God is, in the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans, the trust in a God who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." (Romans 4:17)

There are obvious parallels between the reading in Genesis, which deals with Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son, and today's Epistle, from Romans, in which Paul proclaims God - who did not withhold God's own Son, but gave him up for all of us (Romans 8:32). But we shouldn't consider the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as simply a foreshadowing of what was God was about in Jesus' death. The Old Testament in general and the Abraham story in particular stand completely on their own, maintaining their own integrity. This story of Abraham and Isaac, as painful and unsettling as some of its details are to us, has truth to offer us, who are years and worlds away.

Yet again, the unspeakable sorrow of the Woodley-Aitcheson family comes to mind, as they continue to grieve the death of their 16 year-old son, Noah, and as they live through the days with the growing recognition that what happened wasn't just a bad dream; that Noah really isn't coming back to them. Those who are privileged to be in contact with the Woodley-Aitchesons see in them the same fear of God to which Abraham's life so powerfully witnessed. The Rev. Fleming Rutledge describes it as ". put[ting] oneself into God's hands totally, even when the road leads out into Godforsakenness, even when the fulfillment of God's promises seems to have receded into impossibility. Throughout

the ages, the story of Abraham has been an important one for those whose faith is tested by terrible events, and when there is nothing remaining to hang on to except St. Paul's words: Abraham believed in 'the God who raises the dead and calls into being the things that do not exist.'"¹

What's the deal with "fearing God?" It's utter trust in God above and beyond all else. It's casting one's lot with God alone. It's hope, even when all human hope is gone. Amen.

¹ Rutledge, Fleming, *The Bible and The New York Times*, p. 102.