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Sermon – 1st Lent
Genesis 22:1-18 & Mark 1:9-15
February 18, 2018

"The Binding of Isaac and the Birth of Faith"

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Genesis 22 juxtaposes a child's innocence with an adult's agony.   The "*binding of Isaac*" is a story stunning and for many, difficult.   How could God, whose creative word in the beginning brought life and order to chaos now ordain chaos in Abraham's family and command a death?   Isaac was the first and only tangible evidence to Abraham that God's promise would be kept.   If this were to happen, Abraham and Sarah would be back to square one, barren again, with no family and no hope of being the ones through whom God blessed anything.

This story not only imperils a life, it imperils faith.   If God could revoke a promise could God be trusted at all?   If God could command this, what else could God command?   Jews are no less troubled by it than we are. There is an ancient Jewish document, a collection of comments on the Old Testament called "the Midrash".   In it the Jewish priests tried to imagine Abraham coming to terms with what God has just told him. They imagine the conversation happening this way.   God says "*take your son*" – Abraham says *"I have two sons, Ishmael the first born, Isaac the second".*   God says; *"your only son"* – Abraham says; *"both are mine, each is the only son of his mother."* God says *"the one whom you love"* – Abraham says *"can a father's love be divided among his children?"* God says *"Isaac."*

In their struggle to make sense of this story, the rabbis are doing more than imagining a difficult conversation. They conclude Abraham did what any human would do - create as much space between ourselves and a command of God as we can - anything thing will do to get out of the reach of obedience. The space Abraham tried to create between himself and this unbearable command of God closed, decisively, with a word - Isaac. There is now no doubt what God requires of him.

Martin Luther said that no human reason or philosophy comprehends the two characteristics of God – that God commands and promises or to put it another way tests and provides. Faith accepts promises more easily we would all agree because promises open possibilities – they reside in the future and create hope. Commands live in the present, and are thus more burdensome, because they are so unambiguous - "*Abraham, take your son, your only son, whom you love…*"

Imagine a pair of shaking old hand gathering wood and an aching heart pounding over and over like any parent caught between a child and the complexities of adult life, pierced by a child's innocent question; "*Father I see wood and fire, but where is the lamb*?"   Isaac's observation of what is apparent and what is missing with regard to the coming ritual elicits from Abraham a confession of what yet may be – what he truly hopes will be; "*God will provide a lamb*."   God once said "*through Isaac your descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky.*" In life's hard places promises are sometimes the only place we can go – which is precisely where Abraham went.   The question this lesson poses for us all is - are we prepared to follow God, who gives and makes promises as well as commands and tests?

We say we are, or at least that is how we pray. In the Lord's Prayer we say "*lead us not into temptation*" - "*do not put us to the test*." We need to pray like that for life tests us enough as it is. That is what Abraham did when to his son Isaac's inquiry he said; "*God will provide a lamb*." We read those words as a bold confession – it was perhaps an anguished prayer. This story is about the testing of Abraham, but Abraham also tests God – by confessing or, if you will, praying that God will provide a way out. "*Give us this day our daily bread*" is also how we pray – and it takes faith to pray this too, to confess we believe "*God will provide a lamb*" for us too. Faith in a promise of God is almost as hard as obedience to a command of God.

Three days ago, in Parkland Florida, parents stood outside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School with anguish in their faces wondering if their child had been taken. The grief and anguish of all people is genuine and sad no matter their faith convictions. As fate would have it, or a troubled 19-year shooter, a reputed loner who "struck out with the girls" may have planned, Wednesday was Valentine's Day. Most news reports took note of that coincidence – a day of love turned into a day of hate. A photographer for the Washington Post captured an image of a woman clutching a young girl - I don't know if it was hers or not - with an unmistakable smudge on her forehead.

A few news agencies reported almost as an afterthought that it was also Ash Wednesday. Whoever that woman was, it wasn't an afterthought for her. She'd gone to church and someone said to her "*you are dust and to dust you shall return*" – and put that smudge of ash in the form of a cross on her forehead as a reminder of her mortality. She may have, as part of that experience prayed "*Father…give us this day our daily bread…and lead us not into temptation.*" After events like these in Parkland, political and cultural perspectives tend to dominate the news. But I say a picture is worth a thousand words. The mom in this picture knew something cultural and political commentators often miss – faith in a God that promises and provides hope is hard, every bit as hard as faith in a God who tests.

"*And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.""* We can't put Jesus in every Old Testament story or find him under every Old Testament rock as it were, but we cannot understand this story of the testing of Abraham without recalling how God did what Abraham was asked - offer a son as proof of his faithfulness – a Son who was tested but provided for - crucified but resurrected. God will provide. "A ram in the thicket, caught by its horns, and a new day of trusting the Lord was born." A Son, perfectly obedient to his father, fixed by his hands to the cross, and a promise is fulfilled. To have such a faith is never easy, but it will never let you down. AMEN