

Fr. John's Homily for March 5, 2023, 2nd Sunday of Lent. Abraham

JMJ CHS

As you probably know, we cycle through the Eucharistic prayers throughout the weeks of the month. This is the first week so we will use Eucharistic prayer number one. It's also known as the Roman Canon, and it is also the oldest of the prayers. Within this prayer we recognize three important people from old testament history. We talk about the bread and wine offered by the high priest Melchizedek, the acceptable offering Abel (son of Adam and Eve), and *the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in the faith*.

Our father in the faith. That's quite a title. He is actually considered the father of three major religions – the Jews, the Muslims and ultimately, us Christians. But it all goes back to him. Why him? I have no idea. Why does God choose anybody? But he was a man who was living in a city called Ur in Chaldea which is near the modern day Persian Gulf. God told him to take his family, pack up their belongings and head to a land promised to him and to his descendants. Present-day Israel. God had a plan. And Abraham obeyed.

It's been many years now and a lot of history has happened since, but the land of Abraham is now modern-day Israel, a prosperous country and despite its small size, it is a world power. I would call it the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy and a modern day miracle. And if the nations know what's good for them, they won't wanna mess with little Israel. Because, well, it's God's Country.

Now there are several interesting stories about Abraham and his long relationship with God. One of them that we talk about regularly is the subject of that icon by Andre Rublev that we have there at the back of our church. Three identical figures, considered to be the Blessed Trinity, are believed to be from that story of the three messengers who came to visit with the now very elderly Abraham and Sara in the desert. The messengers announced the arrival of the son that was promised to them so many years earlier, the son who would be named Isaac.

But of all the stories about Abraham, there's one that stands above the rest and that is the "attempted" sacrifice of Isaac which was alluded to in the Eucharistic prayer. It is unquestionably a very controversial event. Those who have pondered on it over the years have often wondered about how God could put someone to that kind of a test. It seemed awfully cruel. And we preachers have been charged with preaching on it as we try to address the complexities of the story and the *overarching* meaning of it all.

Occasionally, I have mentioned that modern experts often describe the event in terms of *ethics*. It would be terribly unethical, they say, to put someone to that kind of test. Thus, God is unethical. He's unfair. He's not good. But, it's an ancient story and we moderns can't really judge things that happened in different cultures long ago and far away. Nevertheless, we too, that is we Christians, can also be modern critics of this story. The test of Abraham's obedience seems like a very confusing and unreasonable command, especially if you're a parent. It seems like God is capricious, contradicting himself.

Secondly, this could be described as a modern-day version of the pot calling the kettle black. For their part, science and medicine in the modern era have done some pretty unethical things. Some of you who have taken college psychology courses might be familiar with the story of a test

given to some subjects who were put in a room with a dial that would administer electrical shocks of increasing intensity to somebody in another room. They were told by the test administrators that they should not let themselves be affected by the screams of those anonymous victims on the other side of the wall.

The test subjects were obedient to the instructions of the administrators and continued to increase the voltage while listening to the screams of those they thought they were shocking. This test has been widely criticized as an unethical use of psychology. How do you suppose those test subjects felt about themselves after the whole thing was over? My thinking is that they had a very low opinion of themselves. They were like lemmings who obeyed the instructions of false leaders. But, as unethical as the test might've been, it did, in fact, teach us some lessons about ourselves. Am I a lemming too? It seems to me that we all have to exercise some discernment, when it comes to things like this concept of obedience.

If you'd really like to get into the Abraham story, we have the FORMED app available through the parish, free to everyone, and of course, there's no shortage of things on *YouTube*, where I checked out both Bishop Robert Barron and Dr. Brant Petrie who I mentioned in my Ash Wednesday homily. Both of them gave great insights to help us better come to grips with the story of Abraham.

Well, this year we will be treated to a special homily on Abraham in the form of a movie. It will be coming out in theaters at the end of this month and it's called *His Only Son*. And of course, you're probably thinking that refers to Isaac, the son promised to Abraham and Sarah. And you wouldn't be wrong in drawing that conclusion. But, there is a second conclusion. Another layer of meaning. His Only Son ultimately refers to..... Jesus. The Only Son ....of God.

We know that at the last moment, Abraham's hand was restrained by the angel, but God the Father did not restrain His own hand in allowing his Son, Jesus, to be sacrificed as the Lamb of God. That, of course, *is* the overarching meaning behind the story of the sacrifice of Abraham.

There is a trailer available on YouTube to wet your appetite. I'm looking forward to it and maybe it's one of those things where we can all go together. I think it's going to be that good.

Now, we can't close without saying something about *The Transfiguration*. Jesus takes his closest circle of disciples up to the top of a mountain and is changed before them. Transfigured. Remember, up to this time, the disciples, despite seeing some incredible miracles wrought by the hands of Jesus, have only seen him as a physical human being. Something like the prophets before him. But in this special moment, he appears transcendent. He appears to them as one divine. This will be a support and an encouragement for them in the days to come, when Jesus will be taken away from them in a very mysterious and confusing way. He had proved himself as God, and yet at the same time, allows Himself to be sacrificed as the Lamb of God. He is obedient. And in doing so, he teaches us obedience.

The two prophets of the Old Testament appear with Him and then they hear words from the Father in heaven, "*This is my beloved Son. Listen to him*". I learned from Bishop Barron, that the Latin word for listen is *obedire*(sp) which means *obey*. To expand even more, the Father is telling the disciples, and us, these many years later, to listen, to obey, to trust, and to follow His Only Son.

And so, perhaps the central message of the Abraham story, in combination with the transfiguration story, is one of trust. God sees the big picture. He has a will, a purpose, and a plan that will be fulfilled, not necessarily in a moment, a day, or even a lifetime, but maybe in a millennium. God is really beyond our comprehension.

So, let's remember always that *with God, one day is as a 1000 years and 1000 years is as one day*, and that *His thoughts are way above our thoughts and His ways are way above our ways*. And maybe with this understanding we will better be able to understand and accept the story of the sacrifice of *Abraham, Our Father in the Faith*.

Mini homily:

The theme of the today's homily was a test of obedience. The obedience of Abraham to God in offering his son Isaac. It was an incredible and controversial test. But it should be recognized that God sometimes puts us to the test as well. It could be a test of our loyalty, our trust, and our willingness to obey, even when we don't want to. Most of us, Americans, at our core, don't want to obey anybody. We are independent souls and obedience kind of rubs us the wrong way.

Nevertheless, God sometimes gives us a thorn in our flesh that can test our faith. A temptation to "throw in the towel", to leave it all behind, and follow another hope, another dream, another person. Even another God.

Let today's story of Abraham remind us of the possibility, maybe even the probability, that our faith can and will be tested, just as Abraham's was.

We should pray about this. That we might be prepared for that test should it come. We actually already have a prayer and it's pretty famous. It's *The Lord's Prayer*, and we address the issue when we say, "and lead us not into temptation". That word can be synonymous with the word test.

St. It says that God tempts no one but, he sure can test us. But there is also the encouragement that he will not test us beyond our abilities to resist. In the end, the testing can build character, strengthen us, and prepare us for future storms.

~Fr. John