

Testing

I suspect we have all had moments in our lives where we could identify with the plight of Abraham in today's reading. Perhaps we have not been asked to sacrifice our first-born child, but we have all been asked to give up something or someone near and dear to us, to let go and to place in God's care a task we can no longer perform, a loved one we can no longer protect, a dream we can no longer pursue.

To call such a time a time of testing can seem more than an understatement. For with a test, we have had time to prepare. And if it is an important test, one that will shape the course of our future life, we will have prepared ourselves for years, so that when the time of testing arrives, we are as prepared as we ever will be. We learn as much as we can, cram even the night before, we have practiced, over and over again to be as proficient as we can possibly be when we have to prove that we've got what it takes.

But the kind of test which Abraham undergoes today, the kind of test we have all encountered at one time or another in our lives, is not that kind of a test at all. It arises not at a time of strength but at a time of weakness—not at a time of confidence, but a time of doubt, a time of darkness, sometimes even a time of outright despair, when our future is not merely on the line, but when any future seems closed off to us.

We hold up this story of Abraham, called upon by God to sacrifice his own beloved son, as an exemplar of true faith. In those dark times in our own lives we too are called by this same God to follow in Abraham's footsteps; to climb with Abraham that same mountain of doubt and fear, in the hope that at its summit, we too may learn that the sacrifice before us when up close is not quite what we feared from afar. And that whatever it may be, that it is not the end of the story. That however it might appear, we have not been abandoned, that the God who can make such demands on us is still also a God whose love for us surpasses anything we can ever hope for or imagine.

If Abraham's obedience to God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac is an everlasting memorial to his faith and his devotion to God, and of God's to Abraham, what then can we say of God's faith and devotion to us? Like Abraham, God did not spare his own beloved son, but handed him over into our hands for our sake. Abraham was ultimately spared his terrible sacrifice, but God went through with his, and unlike Abraham, he did not shield his son from what lay in store for him.

"This is my beloved son" So thunders the heavens in today's Gospel. We have heard it before, at the beginning of Mark's Gospel at Jesus' baptism. And we shall hear it again later at the end of Mark's Gospel in the voice of the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross-- "Truly this was the Son of God."

What then does it mean to be God=s son? This is not an idle question for any of us, for as Paul will also proclaim repeatedly in his letters, we Christians, we are all children of God.

This Lent we accompany Jesus as he learns that being God=s son does not even mean protection from suffering. What *does* it mean then to be a child of God? What good is it? As Mark's Gospel goes on to proclaim, what it means isn=t that we are not going to suffer, but that suffering does not have the final word. That our failures, even our sin, never defines who we are and what we are worth. What it means is that the voice pounding in our ears in such times, that voice of shame, of condemnation, of self-contempt, that terrible voice is not the voice of God angry with us, but rather the demonic voice of the evil one who would eviscerate what good still lies within us; who would enervate what good intentions we are still capable of. It is the voice not of the Truth that sets us free but of the Lie from the Prince of Lies.

What does it mean to be a child of God? It means to be transfigured. It means faith in the midst of doubt. It means perseverance in the midst of despair. And it means love, love even when we feel unloved; love for the stranger as though they were our neighbor; love for our neighbor as though they were ourselves, and love for ourselves as though we were children of God, for we are.