

Sermon for 28 June 2020 @ Bethesda

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13 (UM746); Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

*"Power"*

One of the hard things for me is to face something big ... Like growing old...

I think that's why I've had, not panic attacks, but dark times, over the last year or two.

I know you'll say, "but you were old before that!" ... but I'm just sayin' ....

...or maybe, preaching .... Like last night, for whatever reason, I just hadn't written a thing down, despite thinking and praying about the scriptures and the title I selected on Monday so Charles could print the bulletin ...

Suddenly, a whirl of problems rush to my side, and I count them over, one by one .... And for awhile, I don't feel hopeful. And then .... Somehow ... out of long experience ... I get going ...

You fill in the blanks. You have times feeling powerless, too ... and in fact, the person who doesn't is usually not looking @ the whole picture, in my opinion.

The striking text in today's readings is the first one, about Abraham and the sacrifice of his son, Isaac.

Like lots of scripture, two hundred years of research (that's about how long we've been applying serious historical scholarship to the Bible, which is probably why so many people began to say they'd "lost faith," over the past century or so ).... All this serious scholarship hasn't made us certain what's behind this story. Lots of scripture got written down during the Jews' exile in Babylonia, between 700 and 500 B.C., when they'd lost their promised land, all their earthly power, Solomon's temple, and were outcasts, nobodies, "unbelievers," in the culture around them ... That's when the synagogue got started, and rabbis wrote down so many of the stories the people of Israel had been telling ,and praying over, for generations ...

Anyway, Abraham is the chosen leader ... and he's told by the voice out of the whirlwind to go and sacrifice Isaac. Now, many ancient cultures had child sacrifice at some time. It was a test, the rabbis called it ... and at the last minute, Jahweh said, "Stop! I see you're faithful!" and that's the story.

Power. God is power. We have a beautiful way of utilizing this chilling story in the Christian tradition. We say, not only does God love us, God sacrificed God's son out of love for us. John 3:16, as we learned it in Sunday School. God uses power to give up power. That, in fact, is true love. God used power to push Abraham ... Power is what it's all about. We can do anything if we have faith as big as a mustard seed, Jesus tells the disciples." We begin to understand love if we stop trying so hard to control everything.

Back to my fear @ big things. When they come, I'm often pretty brave. It's the night before that I'm sleep-deprived.

Much of scripture ... many of Jesus' sayings, indeed ... are more than fact, as we tell our young ones over and over. Much of scripture has parallels in other great religions. The Jews do pretty well with the Abraham story by itself. God is asking for real trust, and real trust gives us the capacity to recognize true love. Incredible as it seems, even the Holocaust hasn't disproven that. Just like, isn't it incredible that enslaved blacks saw and accepted Christianity, the religion that had @ least the lip-service of their enslavers? Humanity faces similar issues, generation after generation; and classic stories help express our deepest conclusions, what we hold onto when the waves are high ... or as we often say these days, when the basic rules of conduct and kindness are getting less and less adherence.

In fact, what's going on now, all over, makes power a bigger item than when we didn't talk about big things, and didn't look seriously @ how to improve them ... and we are doing a great deal of that.

I consider part of my job ... part of our job when we get together every week .. is re-teaching that list of things that really make life worthy. Right now, of course, part of our time needs to be spent in lamenting how much trouble we're in, and praying over it; but then, we need some examples of the other side of things. Let me just cite one: I'm a police chaplain, and last night I decided that, because I hadn't felt like going to the change-of-shifts celebration @ the Northeastern District Station Saturday a.m., I'd like to send a check for refreshments anyway. I have the name and address. Or, donations of energy bars and other non-perishables can be donated ... so that the police see that here's a little church that's wanting them to let us bless them, and that's praying for them. I know that's small ... and I know this just touches the story of Abraham and the idea of power and everything I've talked about ... but the power is somewhere we are, as well as somewhere we're afraid we're not, and that's what we mean when we say, "Jesus is Lord." The change-of-shifts ceremony is to encourage the police, who are feeling pretty down right now, as I hear it ... But it's also, if we give something towards it, an opening to something I've been trying to get for more than a decade: A visit from one or two officers to us here on one Sunday, just for a few moments... because folks, the police have to go through some real soul-searching, and we as citizens have to lobby for some real changes in our communities, including ones that will help police and make them more accountable. THAT'S what this moment is full of, folks: The power to move towards better cooperation, more talk with one another, patience and follow-through, NEW LIFE. Maybe a donation towards their party will make our local police give us the chance both to love and to help them change ...or maybe it's always both, one side and the other together, wherever human beings are.

Power.

God's kind of power.

Lord, please help us make useful sense out of what you've given me to say this morning.

Amen.