

2nd Sunday of Lent, Year B

Fr. Samuel Springuel

25 February, 2024

1st Reading Genesis 22:1–2,9a,10–13,15–18

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 116:10,15,16–17,18–19

2nd Reading Romans 8:31b–34

Gospel Mark 9:2–10

What do you imagine Abraham was thinking when God asked him to sacrifice Issac? I mean, think about it, God had originally promised Abraham numerous descendants when Abraham was 75 years old. When Abraham was 86, Ishmael, Abraham's first son, was born of Hagar, Sarah's maidservant. At 99, Abraham was assured that the original promise would come through a son of Sarah, his wife. And at 100, Issac was born. Now "some time later," as the Bible puts it, God tells Abraham that he needs to sacrifice Issac as a whole burnt offering, a holocaust. What was Abraham to think of that promise, made so long ago and clarified more recently, in light of this new commandment of God?

The Letter to the Hebrews credits Abraham with a profound faith: "He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead." That Abraham's faith was so strong, that he never doubted the promise, even when asked to do something that would seem to confound the promise in the normal course of events. I wonder, however, about that. While the inerrancy of the Bible in matters of faith tells me that this is the truth, I can't help but put myself in Abraham's shoes and come to a different conclusion. If God were to ask of me what he asked of Abraham, I know I would doubt. I know I would suspect that the promise was a failure. Not that God had failed, but I had failed somehow. I hadn't lived up to my end of the covenant, done something which God needed to punish me for. Maybe it was that sojourn in Egypt, when I had my wife pretend to be my sister because I didn't trust God to keep me safe. Or perhaps, having made it safely through that incident, it was when I did it again at Gerar. Maybe God was annoyed with my questions over Sodom and Gomorrah because they had shown me as doubting his justice. Whatever it was, I had failed and now this sacrifice of my son was punishment for that failure.

And it's this chain of thoughts, perhaps, which indicates the biggest difference between myself and Abraham: Abraham was a man of great faith, who trusted God even when it seemed absurd; I have only a little faith, a faith that doubts when things don't make sense to me.

In this I am both envious and consoled by Peter's story. Peter's faith seems to bridge the gap between my own and Abraham's. There are times when Peter's faith is immense, on par with Abraham's, and times when it is small, and more like my own. Peter, after all, had the faith necessary to demand to

walk on water when he saw Jesus do the same, and the doubt that led him to sinking after maybe half-a-dozen steps. Peter had the great insight to be the first to identify Jesus as the Messiah, as we heard on Thursday. But he was also brash, of a fixed opinion that would not let him accept the idea of the Messiah needing to suffer, be handed over to the elders, and killed. A prejudice which would lead to him admonishing Jesus for predicting such a thing and earn him the rebuke, "Get behind me Satan." And today, when privileged to see Jesus transfigured in glory, Peter is afraid and babbles about tents.

In each of these three events, we see a movement from greatness, of faith, of insight, of privilege, to littleness, doubt, prejudice, fear. Peter zooms to the heights, only to crash and burn. It's a pattern that will repeat itself most dramatically in the Passion. At the Last Supper, Peter will boldly proclaim, "Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be." To this, Jesus merely shakes his head and prophesies: "Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times." Of course, Peter objects, "Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you," but we know how the story goes, and Jesus's prophecy comes true. But even in the moment of prophesy there is hope: "I have prayed for you Peter, that your faith may not fail. And when you have repented, you must strengthen your brothers." "When," not "if." Yes, Jesus predicts Peter's failure, but also his recovery. Peter's faith may not be as big as he thinks it is, but in its littleness it still will not fail. Peter will recognize his failure and weep over what he has done. And after the Resurrection, Jesus will elicit from Peter a three-fold affirmation of love to counter-balance the three-fold denial: "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "I do not know the man." "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Damn it! I do not know this man about whom you are talking!" "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you!"

Peter's faith may at times be small, much smaller than he realizes, but it is the smallness of a seed, a mustard grain. And Jesus, he's the gardener, the one who tends to the seed that is planted in the ground of Peter's soul. He waters it, he fertilizes it, and sees to its growth so that it may become a faith as great, if not greater, than Abraham's.

And so I have hope for my own faith. When I compare it to Abraham it seems so small. But with Jesus as my gardener, that faith will grow, it will become bigger, become the mighty plant. That process may not be easy; it will not be something I can control, but with the father who brings his epileptic son to be healed by Jesus just after the Transfiguration I find the courage to pray, "Lord I do believe, help my unbelief."