

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 8, 2009
Second Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 22:1-14
Psalm 16:5-11
Romans 8:31-39
Mark 8:31-38

Many years ago after hearing the story about Abraham and Isaac that we've read from Genesis this morning, a man went to his pastor after the service. He walked up to his minister and said, "pastor, I want you to know that my family and I will be looking for another church after today."

His pastor was surprised, and said, "do you mind if I ask why?"

The young man responded: "Because when I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I'm near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham's God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know *that* God."

And just who is this God?

Well, this God is the God who more than 25 years earlier called Abraham and told him that he would bless the whole world through Abraham's offspring. But as the years passed, Abraham sometimes could not see or understand how God was accomplishing that, especially when he and Sarah had no children.

So, Abraham ended up lying *to* others about Sarah, and lying *with* Hagar instead of Sarah, in an effort to help God fulfill his promise.

But when God can't work *through* us, he'll work *in spite* of us, and so he did with Abraham. Eventually, Isaac was born. Isaac was a miracle child. He was the one through whom the whole picture now came into clear focus. From Abraham's chair, everything was riding on Isaac.

And just when the journey seems free of potholes, God comes to Abraham and asks him to offer the child back to God on Mt. Moriah. To give back the one on whom everything depends. To give up his only son, the one promised to him so many years before.

This clearly is not the God who is talked about at Rotary Club meetings. Truth be told, it's not the God spoken of in most churches, because we want a God who is rational and makes sense. And what God asks of Abraham here is an act of obedience that appears completely *irrational*.

This story might be a little less unsettling for us if we could leave it in the past and dust it off once every three years as an interesting lesson about how God dealt with Abraham. But we're not far into the Lenten season when we realize that what God asked of Abraham he also asks of us. That is, he asks of us an act of obedience that is completely *irrational*.

What is it that is asked of us?

So that I don't mess it up, let me quote:

If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life. (Mk. 8:34-35)

Suddenly, the challenge that faced both Abraham and Jesus now confronts each of us as well. And although we're not told how Abraham and Jesus felt, I can tell you how I feel at times when I ponder these words.

I feel that if I surrender my whole life to God, then I may end up as some sort of "doormat." The great devotional writer Oswald Chambers goes so far as to say that this is exactly what will happen, that we become doormats for Jesus' sake. But there are moments in my life when I'm not sure I'm ready to be a doormat.

And I sometimes feel that if I commit my entire life to God and give him priority in every area of my life, then that means that I surrender my checkbook to him. And when that happens, I'm afraid that if I give like God asks me to give then there won't be enough for me and my family.

And I sometimes feel that if I give my whole life to God, that means that I turn my time over to God. And I fear that when I do that, there won't be enough time for me to do some of the things that I want to do.

And I sometimes feel that if I give my whole life to God, then that means that my thoughts and attitudes must be surrendered to him also. That means that

I'm going to need to see people from God's eyes, not my eyes. I'll need to learn to love people like God loves them. I'll need to learn to forgive others like God in Christ has forgiven me.

How do you respond when you're told that the way to gain life is to give it away? How do you react when you're told to open your heart and your hands, to unclench your fists, and to let go? What goes through your mind when you're told that the way to be most fully alive is to die? How do you respond to a God who asks you to offer yourself up to him in a way that seems completely irrational?

Perhaps St. Augustine had a partial answer when he said: "what seems hard, love makes easy."

This is true. But it's truth lies not so much in our love for God, but in God's love for us! The Apostle Paul says: "He who spared not his own Son, will he not also freely give us all things?"

In perhaps the most irrational, outlandish thing ever done, the God of the universe gave up his only Son out of love for you and me. The very thing which was asked of Abraham, God did!

This is the kind of love that empowers us to irrational obedience! God's great love for us empowers us to let go, to give ourselves away, to live beyond ourselves and out of ourselves. And as we do, we discover something truly amazing. We discover that we are most alive when we are giving ourselves away.

We are most free when we are serving others. We are wealthiest when we are conduits of God's abundance. We are wisest when we seek the mind of Christ. We are most at peace when we forgive and seek healing and reconciliation.

As we come to the table this morning, we come as guests of the One who invites us to give our lives away irrationally, in ways that sometimes don't make sense. Love -- and love alone -- is what makes that possible. Not merely our love for God -- but God's irrational love for us.

As you receive these tokens of bread and wine this morning, you are coming face to face with the irrational, outlandish, exuberant love of God. And as you go this morning, the world will encounter that same irrational, exuberant love -- through *you*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.