

Faith of the Fathers
Genesis 22:1-14
July 2, 2017 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

There are a few stories in the Hebrew Bible that Jews and Christians interpret quite differently, and the story of Abraham and Isaac which we just heard is one of them. Christians typically call this “the sacrifice of Isaac” even though, in the end result, Isaac was not sacrificed. Jews refer to the story as the *Akedah*, a Hebrew word that means “binding,” and thus, they will refer to the “binding of Isaac.” Christians like to see this story as a precursor for God’s sacrificing of Jesus on the cross; but Jews see it as an emphasis of Abraham’s faithfulness and his trust in the Lord.

My rabbi friends point out several nuances in the scripture to support their belief that Abraham actually trusted that God would not let him go through with the sacrifice of his Son. First, the command to Abraham. . . The literal translation of the Hebrew is “Then [God] said, ‘take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Make him go up there as a burnt offering. . .’” The rabbis note that the verb for “make him go up” is not the verb normally used for “sacrifice.”

Perhaps more important is the statement that Abraham makes to the two young men traveling with them: “Stay here with the donkey, and the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then *we* will come back to you.” In Hebrew, the verb is clearly plural – “*We* will come back to you.” Of course, many will say that Abraham was simply hiding his intentions from the young men; but the rabbis note that this is not characteristic of Abraham. Abraham was not a liar or a deceiver. Abraham clearly believed that both would return, despite God’s earlier call.

Finally, when Isaac asks his father, “Where is the lamb for the offering,” Abraham responds that “God will provide the lamb.” Thus, the rabbis suggest that we should take that response seriously; and, indeed it turns out to be true – God does provide a ram caught in a thicket as an offering instead of Abraham’s son, Isaac.

Now, I need to emphasize – this is a story of the faith. We don’t know if this ever actually happened; and, actually, I hope it did not, because I can’t imagine the psychological impact this would have on Isaac. But, I don’t think we’re supposed to ask about Isaac. What we have here is a story of fantastic faith and trust in God on the part of Abraham.

So Tuesday is the Fourth of July, Independence Day. 241 years ago, representatives of thirteen English Colonies signed a Declaration of Independence declaring these United States of America a free and sovereign nation. Can you imagine the kind of faith and trust that took. You know the words. . .

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (today we would say all people) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Of course, the Declaration of Independence goes on at some length regarding the grievances which the colonists cited against the English King and Parliament, before concluding. . .

And for the support of this Declaration, with the firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.

The Declaration of Independence – one of the greatest documents the world has ever known, because it created the greatest democracy the world has ever known. Now, I will be the first to acknowledge that our democracy and our government is far from perfect. No human institution is; and, at the present, we are going through particularly rocky times. It's a time of deep division in our country – division between the have's and have-not's; division between ultraconservatives and extreme progressives; division between militarists and pacifists; divisions between those who are socialist minded and those who feel that capitalism will ultimately create a great society. And I need to tell you that there are times which I am fearful for the future of this great nation. But I truly believe something else: The answer to those fears lies in our faith and trust of God. The answer to those fears lies right here in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was July 30, 1956 that President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a congressional bill adopting "In God We Trust" as the official motto of these United States of America. Since that time, it has appeared on all U.S. Currency; but do we believe it? Will we as individuals and as a nation live it?

Now, I'm not suggesting that we simply sit back and leave it all the work to God. Yes, we as individuals, we as citizens of this nation must take responsibility. I'm sure many of you have heard the story of a man who was seated on his front porch as the flood waters started to raise. The Fire Department came by in an SUV and told the man to evacuate. The man responded, "I trust in God. God will provide. I'll be okay." The flood waters continued to rise, and the man was seated in his second story window, when the Department of Fish and Wildlife came by in

a boat, and told the man to get in. The man responded, “I trust in God. God will provide. I’ll be okay.” The flood waters continued to rise, and now the man was seated on his roof, when the National Guard came by in a helicopter, and told the man to climb in. The man responded, “I trust in God. God will provide. I’ll be okay.” The man drowned. When he got to heaven, he asked God, “I put my faith in you; how could you let me drown?” God replied, “I sent an SUV, a boat, and a helicopter. What more did you want?” As we have God-given, unalienable rights, we also have responsibilities; and I believe our responsibility as a Christian is to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s what it means to put our faith and trust in God.

I frequently speak of spreading the Good News of God’s Amazing Love; and spreading it by thought and word and deed. Yes, I believe that is the responsibility of every Christian; and I also believe that is the responsibility of a nation that would stamp on its currency, “In God We Trust.”

And so, Tuesday is the Fourth of July. I hope this Fourth of July in addition to watching fireworks, and in addition to celebrating with family, you will take some time to reflect and pray. Reflect on the faith of those who have gone before, those in the military, those in government, those in private industry; and reflect on the call to love God and to love our neighbors; and pray. Pray that we as individuals and as a nation might truly put our faith and trust in God; and pray with the last verse of that wonderful song: “America, America, God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.”

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,

Lead us and guide us,

as individuals, as a community, and as a nation,

that we may follow your teaching in faith and in trust.

May “In God We Trust” be not just a motto,

but a true statement of our faith, as we seek to do your will

and spread to love to your people everywhere.

This we pray in your holy name.

Amen.

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