



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Seventh Sunday After Trinity, July 14th, 2013

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

St. Mark's account of the feeding of the Four Thousand – the subject of today's Communion Gospel reading – provides us with an unforgettable example of the love God has for his people. Four thousand men, plus women and children – stranded far away from home, with nothing to eat and no way of obtaining it – are miraculously fed, from the contents of a single lunch box.

It is our assurance that, no matter how bleak our situations might appear, God will take care of us – not simply making things better, but, ultimately, making things turn out for the best. What's more, the incident teaches us that God is aware of our needs long before we are and has already made the plans necessary to help us.

Contrast this picture of a loving, caring God with the God we meet in another of the readings appointed for today – Genesis, Chapter 22, Verses 1-18; the story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac.

At first reading, God does not come out of this episode looking particularly kind and caring. Far from it! Not only does God appear to be a cruel and heartless practical joker, he also looks like a total ingrate.

Abraham has committed himself entirely to God and taken the most extraordinary leap of faith. He has given up family, friends, his high social standing in one of the most sophisticated societies the world has seen to go wandering, at his new God's behest, in a land he hardly knows – a stranger in a strange land.

And what is Abraham's reward for his remarkable leap of faith? Not very much one might be forgiven for thinking. He accumulates a certain degree of wealth, but no more than he could reasonably have expected had he remained in the comfort and security of the city of Haran. In return for the covenant he makes with God – under which he acknowledges God's sovereignty over him – God promises to make him "the father of many nations" and to give his descendants the land of Canaan to live in at some unspecified future date.

So far the benefits all seem to be on God's side: He's gotten Abraham to worship him in exchange for a bunch of pie-in-the-sky promises. To be sure, Abraham and his family survive God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But it was God who put them in harm's way in the first place. If he hadn't ordered them to be nomads, they wouldn't have gone anywhere near Sodom and Gomorrah in the first place.

Abraham's most tangible reward is a legitimate son, Isaac, miraculously born to his wife, Sarah, long after she was past child bearing. That's very nice, of course, just what the couple wanted in fact. But all the same, it seems a modest enough reward for all those years camping out in the middle of nowhere.

But instead of leaving poor old Abraham to enjoy his son, Isaac, in peace, God plays a horribly mean trick on him. He tells Abraham to load a donkey with fuel and take Isaac to Mount Moriah. There, Abraham is to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering to demonstrate

his obedience to God. We, of course, know all along that God didn't intend to let him sacrifice the boy. But this doesn't make God's behavior excusable – at least not from our early 21st century perspective.

How can God purport to be a God of love when he puts this unfortunate man, who had given up everything for him, through three days of utter anguish? It makes not a whit of difference that just as Abraham was about to plunge in the knife, God send an angel to say: "God believes you. You needn't to go through with it." Isaac is, terrified, lashed to the altar, screaming for his life and his dad is standing over him with a dagger. That's not something likely to enhance the father/son relationship. It was an appallingly cruel thing that God did to the pair of them.

But before we commit the terrible sin of passing judgment on God, let us pause to consider what God was doing – not solely in this episode of "testing" Abraham's faith, but in his whole relationship with him and his family. In doing so, we must bear in mind God's entire purpose in all this was to reveal himself to Abraham, and, through Abraham and his descendants, to reveal himself to mankind.

This is a rather more complicated process than it might at first appear. It isn't, for example, something God could accomplish by suddenly materializing and saying: "I'll grant you three wishes." God isn't the good fairy. He is our creator. He is almighty, all-powerful, omnipresent, omnipotent, all-seeing and eternal. And these are incredibly complicated – indeed, sophisticated – ideas to get across. No human being, in one human lifetime, could be expected to develop a mental picture of a being so radically different from ourselves.

But God didn't expect Abraham to develop the picture of himself that he wanted to convey to us within the span of a single human life. The process of revelation took thousands of years. If we count it as beginning with Abraham, it took best part of 3,000 years until it was completed in Jesus Christ. That is a seriously long lesson.

It took such a long time because we find it difficult to conceive of a God who is so very much different from us. One problem is that when we conceptualize God, we tend to see him as a rational being like ourselves, only much larger, more powerful and more intelligent. But by now the process of revelation should have taught us this is not at all the case.

The lessons God taught Abraham seem today to be simple and straightforward. By the time, God asked Abraham to sacrifice of Isaac, he was well aware that God is one – a big leap for a person brought up to believe that there are large numbers of Gods. He had also learned God is holy; that he is perfectly righteous and just and that there is a penalty to pay for disobeying him. He had learned these lessons by experience. He had, for example, personally witnessed God pass terrible judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. And God taught Abraham that he is also perfectly loving and merciful in exactly the same manner.

Human sacrifice was the rule in Abraham's day. People of his culture believed the gods demanded the lives of their first-born children – the most precious thing they possessed. One can imagine Abraham thinking that the new God, whose servant he had become – while different in virtually every respect from the pagan Gods – was in this one vital respect the same as the others in that he demanded proof in human blood that Abraham worshipped him above all things.

To teach him otherwise, God allowed Abraham go through his effort to prove his devotion in the traditional manner. But he stopped him seconds before his knife plunged into Isaac's heart to drive home the fact that God abhorred and condemned this appalling practice. True, Abraham and Isaac must have suffered terrible mental anguish, but their anguish would have been far outstripped by their joy at learning God not require them to sacrifice their children to him, and, indeed, God, himself, would provide the sacrificial victim to atone for their sins.

It was lesson so dramatic it stayed with Abraham and Isaac's descendants for 1500 years or so – until shortly before the Babylonian exile when they began sacrificing babies to the Phoenician god Moloch outside the walls of Jerusalem. What's more, the lesson was not complete until 500 years later when God revealed the full extent of his love for us in the identity of sacrificial victim he promised Abraham to atone for our sins. It is astonishing – indeed, awesome – to contemplate that God freely made for us, his creatures, the sacrifice he prevented Abraham making. *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN