

A Sermon for Lent 2, Year B
March 12, 2006 — Genesis 22: 1–14 & Mark 8: 31–38.
Fr. Jim Cook

The Cost of My Discipleship.

There was a time in my life when I really liked this morning's story from Genesis, the story of how Abraham was going to sacrifice his son. I used to like it because of what I thought it said about Abraham: that he's a man of God, who didn't back down from the tough choices, and who was willing to do the hard things that need to be done. There was, in my reading of that story, a certain machismo in Abraham's actions that really appealed to me when I was a teenager. That's probably why I was attracted to the macho-men movie stars like Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson. They were guys who made the tough decisions, and who did the hard things, and I wanted to be like them. (And how did I turn out? As a parish priest! What a big, tough guy I am! Not!) But now that I'm an adult, and a parent, I absolutely hate this story. And I'd like to think that if I had been in Abraham's shoes, I would have had the courage to say "no" to God.

I discovered, however, this week when I was preparing these remarks, that quite a lot has been written about the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of Isaac.

I'm sure you know that the Moslems see Abraham as their spiritual father, as do the Jews. But the Moslems trace their spiritual heritage back to Abraham through Ishmael, Abraham's first-born son, whom he had with his servant-girl Hagar. While the Jews trace their connection to Abraham through Isaac, Abraham's second son, whom he had with his wife Sarah. Anyway, certain Moslem scholars make the claim that the account we've just heard is wrong in one very important detail: it was Ishmael, they claim, that Abraham was going to sacrifice, and not Isaac. And their evidence for this claim is in the words of God spoken to Abraham at the outset: "Take your son, your only son ..." These scholars note that Isaac was Abraham's *second* son, and so at no time would it have been correct to say that Isaac was Abraham's "only son." But those words could have been said of Ishmael, especially during that period of time before Isaac was born. So there's one "take" on this story, that it's basically wrong in its current reading.

And then, certain Jewish scholars take exception to the story because it seems inconceivable to them that God would ever condone child-sacrifice. For it is clear in a number of places in their Scriptures – our Old Testament – that God abhors such actions. Therefore they place heavy emphasis on the story's explicit statement that God was merely testing Abraham's faith and obedience, and that God would never have allowed Abraham to actually go through with the killing. And the words of the angel to Abraham, after the angel stays Abraham's hand, offer some support for this theory: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And that's another "take" on the story, that Abraham was merely being tested.

Still other scholars see something else going entirely. They look at the words of Abraham to one of the servants who accompanied Abraham and Isaac to the site of the supposed sacrifice: "Stay

here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” They see in that phrase “*we* will come back to you” evidence that Abraham never intended to actually sacrifice. Rather, they suppose that Abraham and Isaac were simply going to symbolically, and ritually, re-enact that moment in their spiritual history when God put an end to child sacrifice altogether. That is, Abraham was going through a liturgy of remembering, much as we do every week when we remember the night when Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion. And that’s a third “take” on this story, that it was describing an early form of a Jewish liturgy or ritual – much like, every year at the Feast of the Passover, they ritually re-enact their flight from Egypt and sojourn in the wilderness, through the Seder meal.

But I think this story, which has become known in many circles simply as “The Binding of Isaac,” has something else entirely to tell us, and I believe that will become clear when we consider it in the context of today’s Gospel reading.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is teaching his disciples, and the people who have gathered around them, about the cost of discipleship. Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” I think that, with these particular words, Jesus was speaking not only metaphorically, but also literally. For to be a follower of Jesus meant not only would you meet resistance from the religious establishment, but you would probably also meet resistance from the Roman government, who occupied Palestine during that time. And since the Roman’s favorite way of dealing with rebels and dissidents was to crucify them, Jesus was being more than just a little ironic when he tells his followers to take up a cross. “That’s probably what’s going to happen to you anyway,” Jesus seems to be saying, “so why not bring a cross with you?” Maybe we’re seeing a little bit of Jesus’ sense of humor here, dark though it may be.

But if we take these two accounts – the binding of Isaac, which on its surface, tells us how God has to intervene in Abraham’s attempt to prove his faith in God by sacrificing his son – and the teaching of Jesus, in which one shows his allegiance to God by denying himself – and if we try to mesh these two accounts together, something very interesting floats to the surface. And I think it is this little bit of spiritual insight: *My spiritual journey must not be taken, or lived out, or expressed at the expense of another person.* That is, the only person who pays any price whatsoever for my being a faithful child of God ... is me.

And we can see, in the world around us, plenty of examples of just the opposite sort of behavior. We can see it in those Moslems who riot and rampage because their prophet has been unfavorably depicted in Danish cartoons. We can see it in Israel in the Jewish suppression of the Palestinians over the ownership of certain parcels of land. And we can see it here in Kansas with just about anything associated with Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka.

But you might get to see how this “making others pay for my spiritual journey” scenario gets played out in your own homes, like I did just yesterday. One of my children made the courageous and admirable decision to give up chocolate for Lent. “Good for you,” I said to her. But when I was out yesterday, picking up some groceries before the big KU basketball game, and especially

some iced cream, I was informed that I couldn't choose any flavor of iced cream that had chocolate in it. Oh, really? Do you mean to say that, because you gave up chocolate for Lent, that I can't buy some chocolate chip iced cream? Are we all giving up chocolate for Lent? I don't think so! ... So, I got some vanilla iced cream. It's a very good flavor and, anyway, I've learned as a parent that you have to pick your battles.

Admittedly, mine is a small and insignificant example of how some people can make others pay the price for their spiritual journeys. And the example we saw in the story of Abraham and Isaac is a much more dramatic example. But somewhere in between the extremes of those two stories is where we see too many examples of the very same thing getting played out in the world around us. And if there is anything the church has learned, time and time again, throughout its two thousand year history, it's that this sort of behavior is bad for community.

And so, may I suggest that, during this season of Lent, each of us take a good look at our own spiritual journeys, and see if, in any of it, we're making others pay a price for what we're going through. And if that's the case, then this season of Lent can be the time when we can tidy up our own spiritual house, and do our part to strengthen the Body of Christ.