

July 2, 2023 Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Genesis 22:1-14

"For Better or for Worse"

Douglas T. King

"...In plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live." These are a portion of the old school wedding vows. And still my favorites. Occasionally people will write their own vows and, in my opinion, they often miss the mark. They will offer poems about joy and sunshine and bliss. They are not so much vows as romantic daydreams. And marriage, over time, is a deeper endeavor than romance. It is an intentional commitment to another person that reaches beyond the benefits we receive from them.

In the end, loving devotion is not solely a feeling but also a decision to embrace the nevertheless. Your snoring keeps me up at night, nevertheless I love you. Sometimes your stubbornness crosses the line to absurdity, nevertheless I love you. You always leave the cap off of the toothpaste tube, nevertheless I love you. It is important to note that there are actions in relationships that do reach beyond what can be considered a nevertheless to overlook but that is a topic for another day. We will circle back to this sense of loving devotion in terms of "nevertheless" in a few minutes.

In this morning's lectionary text from Genesis we get a horrifying story. God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son. Unimaginable. Abraham agrees to do it. Horrendous. Thankfully the story ends with Isaac being spared. Did Abraham know God would intervene all along? We do not know. Regardless, the story is terrifying. And we must remember that Isaac was

the beginning of the fulfillment of the grand promise God had made Abraham of becoming a great nation, of having descendants as numerous as the stars in the skies. In effect God is challenging Abraham to choose his relationship with God over all of the blessings he had been promised. To put it bluntly, God is saying, "Do you love me for me or for what I give to you?" "Which will you choose, Abraham? Which will you choose?" It would not be unfair to wonder whether you would want to be in relationship with a God that would ask you to engage in such a horrific act but let's leave that aside.

It is helpful to remember this Genesis narrative was written to a people in exile. It is a book seeking to help them understand how they relate to God when they believe God's blessing, in this case the Promised Land, has been snatched from them. The story of Abraham and his family reminds them that they are indeed God's chosen people. The story provides them with an identity. And that identity binds them together as a people with a purpose. Much like the reason we celebrate July fourth. We are being reminded of our identity created by the signing of the Declaration of Independence and its powerful message of self-evident truths; "...we are created equal... and are endowed by our creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness..."

But what does this odd and disturbing story provide to the Israelites as they struggle in exile? Now is when we return to our "for better or for worse" marriage vows. One of the bases of the relationship between God and the Israelites was the Promised Land. Being in exile had separated them from what they believed to be theirs in perpetuity. Naturally they questioned what their relationship to God was without the land God had given to them. It was one thing to be God's people when they

were awash in God's blessings; during the better times. But how to be God's people devoid of God's blessings in the worse times?

This story of Abraham and Isaac is a stark lesson that their relationship with God should not be dependent upon what they receive from God. If they have to choose between God and the goodies they receive from God, the choice needs to be God. Being removed from the Promised Land does not remove them from their relationship with the divine. And, as in the case of Isaac's close call, the Promised Land will one day be returned to them.

Now it is one thing to talk about what this had to teach those ancient, exiled Israelites. And it is quite another to make the next turn and see what this has to teach us. I am pretty fond of the good things in my life. I would prefer not to experience a Job-like descent. If everything and everyone I love in this world was stripped from me how would I respond to God? I would hope that I could praise God's name every day with vim and vigor regardless of circumstance. I would hope I could boldly call out my trials and tribulations and then declare "nevertheless I worship you, O Lord, with heart and soul and mind." But if you are listening this morning Lord, and I trust that you are, let's not test this out.

Thank God, we are not Abraham. We are not asked to sacrifice what is most beloved to us to demonstrate our fealty. We are not the Israelites, sent into exile, dragged away from their homes and all they had ever known. But we do live lives, that waver between better and worse, joy and sorrow, sickness and health. Sometimes in a single day we find ourselves toggling back and forth between these states of being. And sometimes those times of worse, and sorrow, and sickness are longer and deeper.

The question for us is how do these shifts in our lives

affect our relationship with God. If we associate a strong relationship with God solely with the good things we have received we place ourselves in a precarious position. When we need God the most; when what is good in our life sours; when life is at its most challenging; we can feel alienated from the one we need the most.

But if our love and commitment to God can exist beyond the blessings and good times and into the darkest of times; if we can worship and cherish our God when the rest of our life is in descent; we will never be alone. We will be strengthened and inspired and lifted up by the one who is ever by our side in all kinds of weather.

God never left Abraham's side. And in that stark and disturbing interaction Abraham learned to separate the blessings of God from his relationship with God. Therefore, Abraham was able to recognize God's presence beside him regardless of circumstance.

"...In plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live." When these vows are honored in a marriage we receive the gift of a loving companion by our side in all that comes. When they are honored in our relationship with God we can recognize the divine's loving presence with us no matter what may come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.