

SERVICE OF WORSHIP FOR JUNE 28TH, 2020 (4th Sunday of Pentecost)

Greetings/Welcome

Acknowledgement:

I pay my respect to the traditional custodians of this land in which we live, work and worship. To the elders and members of the Yorta Yorta nation past, present and emerging.

Call to Worship: Let us worship God.

Psalm 13 (RSV)

1 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?
2 How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

3 Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, 4 and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed", my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

5 But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

6 I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Hymn: 96 (TiS)

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Confession:

Creator God, from the moment your Spirit hovered over the waters of this earth, we were part of a vision held lovingly within your heart.

From the moment you spoke and separated darkness from light, you created space where we might one day walk.

From the moment your joy spilled into the green and living things, your beauty was revealed for us to taste and see.

Creator God, for this world, beauty and majesty, we praise your mighty name.

Loving Jesus, we know, that all too often, we hear your voice sending us out towards those who wait in longing for your love and close our ears to your call.

We stay safely within the walls of our familiarities as if that is enough to be your people.

We are sorry for the times when we fail you, O God.

We confess that when people look at our church, they do not always see your faithful disciples, living out your mission of healing and grace.

Forgive us when we do not trust in you to sustain us and guide us as we hold other cloaks of comfort and security around us, afraid to step out into the daring life of the Spirit and fearful for our future.

Forgive us and remind us again of your hopes for us.

This we pray in your name, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Declaration of Forgiveness:

The love of God never changes, no matter how unwise or wilful we are.

Grace is there for us forever.

We are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

Doxology: 772 (TiS)

***Worship, honour, glory, blessing,
Lord we offer to your name;
Young and old, their praise expressing,
Join your goodness to proclaim.
As the saints in heaven adore you,
we would bow before your throne;
as your angels serve before you,
so on earth your will be done.***

Readings: Genesis 22: 1-14 (RSV)

1 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there: we will worship, and then we will come back to you." 6 Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So, the two of them walked on together. 7 Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So, the two of them walked on together.

9 When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. 11 But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham. Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "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."

13 And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So, Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide; as it is said to this day. "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

Mathew 10: 40-42 (RSV)

40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward: and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42 and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Message:

(Prayer – May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our rock and our redeemer)

I have a confession to make, you see, when I read the Old Testament reading for this Sunday, I tried to avoid preaching from it. Personally, it is the most difficult, distasteful, violent and chilling story that one can attempt to interpret, let alone preaching from it. That is the story of Abraham and Isaac and God's instructions to Abraham to sacrifice his own son Isaac.

There seem to be an agreement amongst Jews, Christians and Muslims about the centrality of this story in their respective traditions. But, even that, it does not address the questions that I have, and I believe many of you have also especially if you are hearing the story for the first time.

Is this really the God that I believe in, a God who delights in human sacrifice or the sacrifice of infants? Is this really a story about Abraham's faith or is it about fanaticism? Is it about obedience or extremism? And what about Sarah? Did she consent to the offering of her son as a burnt offering to appease the God who gave him to them in the first place? What is he going to tell her after he returned from the mountain without their son?

It is difficult to imagine what went through Abraham's mind at the time. He may have asked, 'What about the promise, that my seed should fill the land and be as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore? Why? You asked me to give up Ishmael. You told me to cast him out of the tent because he was son of the flesh and not of the promise?

I remember watching this story dramatized by a group of young people in Tonga. When it comes to the part where Abraham laid the wood on the shoulder of his young son, I said to myself, this is part where Isaac runs away. That was the time I left the presentation in shock and in tears.

Some of you are probably saying right now, ok, let's see whether you have any relevant interpretation or meaningful insight from this twisted, misguided, abusive patriarchal story of a near-miss child sacrifice.

After all, isn't this the Abraham who interceded for the lives of good people in Sodom and Gomorrah? Why can't he argue a case for his own son?

There's nothing in our story that tells us about Abraham's emotional reaction. I believe the writer would know that we would instinctively know what this must have meant to Abraham.

As one commentator puts it, "What a sleepless, troubled night of torture and heartbreak this man went through."

If God can do this to Abraham, what is stopping him from asking of me the same thing? Would God, the God we believe in ever ask or call upon us to sacrifice a child or someone we love so dearly? Would God call upon you to kill someone, if it is to the glory of God?

It may sound odd to bible loving Christians that I ask these questions through 21st century lens but it is important that we ask them.

It is important that we ask them because even in today's world, there are places where people, even children, are regularly sacrificed for religious reasons. The ritualized murder of people, often young people, who are homosexual. There are nations who still sanction the stoning of women for sexual infidelity, all in the name of honouring God's law. And there are of course, the brain-washed young people, who are strapped with explosives and send them to their death in the name of God.

We learn, of course, from our story that God does not require barbaric sacrifice of children even though it was common practice for the worshippers of Baal to assure good harvest. The whole story is a story of trials. Abraham is being tested and as Stedman rightly points out, "It is never so difficult when we can see a reason. However, when we are tested and we fail to see any logic, and, in fact, everything seems to be against it, this is when faith is really put to the test."

There was no logic in this test that would have made it more bearable for Abraham, only his belief that the God who called him out of his home, the God who promised Isaac to him and Sarah in their old age, that God "will provide". That was his answer to his beloved son when he said, "See, we have fire, and wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

It must have broken his heart when he said, "God will provide" as the two of them walked on together.

I have said earlier that God does not require barbaric sacrifice of children and I would also add that God does not require obedience that is not grounded in justice. Obedience to the point of cruelty should never be seen as a fruit of the Christian faith. God did not let it happen to Abraham and Isaac and we must not let it happen in our time.

Lastly, the story of the testing Abraham reminds me of the trial that Jesus went through in the garden of Gethsemane. The son, Isaac, who carried the wood for his own sacrifice also reminds me of another son, Jesus, who carried the cross for his own sacrifice. For Abraham, Isaac was as good as dead, as they travelled together on the way to Mt. Moriah and by faith, he offered up Isaac (Hebrew 11:17), only to receive him back. A kind of resurrection! (Hebrew 11:19).

For Abraham, the gift of Isaac and the promise of fruitfulness is no reason to be distracted from the giver. In many ways, this is the essence of this story of the testing of Abraham.

We have become attached to the gifts given to us for our security and our joy, and we find our greatest comfort in those gifts rather than the Giver. They have become for us, our Isaacs, our most valuable possessions. And unlike Abraham, we would not let them go and thereby many miss out on resurrection life. New life, transforming life, and eternal life.

It is my prayer today, that we would hold on to our faith in the God who provides, that we trust the Giver of the gifts we enjoy, and let the story of death and resurrection of the beloved son, son of Abraham, son of David, Son of God claim us now and always. Amen!

Reminder about the offering – prayer for the offering and those who continue to support our mission.

Prayer of Intercession:

God of all creation, as we journey together in this great Southern land, we pray for healing, forgiveness and unity, creating a path of good will, with justice and compassion.

Jesus, through the power of your love, you have given us the courage, wisdom and strength to share our gifts and talents in humility.

Creator Spirit, we come together in prayer and thanksgiving for the many blessings we have received. Allow your Spirit to wash over us and give us strength to work together as one people, your people.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray.

Amen.

(Written by Indigenous people for reconciliation)

Hymn: 687 (TiS)

Blessings:

May the peace and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with and remain with you always.

Amen.