

God Speaks in the Silence

Genesis for Lent 1B on February 18, 2018

Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The text for today is the Old Testament Lesson from Genesis 22.

There are two major themes for us to consider in this text on this First Sunday in Lent. The first theme is the theme of sacrifice. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, his only son whom he loved, but God provided a ram instead. This points us to Jesus, who is both the ram God provides as well as the only Son of God about whom God says in the Gospel Lesson, *"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased"* (Mark 1.11). Jesus is the sacrifice God gave for the sins of all people and Lent is receiving Jesus as God's sacrifice for you and the forgiveness of your sins.

There other theme is the theme of faithfulness in temptation, trial, and testing. Genesis says that *"God tested Abraham"* (22.1). God was aiming at faith not sin. James says that God *"tempts no one"* (1.13). Instead, *"each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire"* (1.14). The devil also tests and tempts and he is aimed at sin and unbelief. Therefore, *"blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life"* (1.12). Like the first theme of sacrifice, this theme of testing also points us to Jesus. Blessed is He. He was faithful in the wilderness, under all other temptations, and was obedient to the point of death (Philippians 2.8).

Today, in the rest of this sermon, we are going to focus our attention on the second theme, the theme of trial and testing, but not so much with an eye toward our faithfulness but *God's* faithfulness. God does call us to faithfulness in times of testing, but *God's* faithfulness to us in those times is the more important thing, for it is His faithfulness to us that gives us the ability to remain faithful to Him. To get at *God's* faithfulness, let's go back to Genesis 22.

There are a number of things that are not said in this text. It is a very matter-of-fact account. God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, so Abraham got up the next morning, saddled his donkey, and set out. Really? Where is the wrestling? Where is the prayer? Abraham is silent. Similarly, there's an awkward silence all the way up the mountain. After Abraham and Isaac leave the two young men, Isaac asks about the lamb for the sacrifice. Abraham, says *"God will provide,"* and *"they went both of them together."* Not another word! That was it? Of course, Isaac's silence at the top of the mountain is palpable. Abraham is busy building the altar and it's almost as if Isaac is just standing there waiting for him to bind him and lay him on the altar. No questions. No prayers. Nothing. Thank God the angel of the Lord said something! *"Stop, Abraham!"* Finally, there is absolutely nothing said about the return trip. Isaac doesn't ask and Abraham doesn't answer. The verse right after our text, verse nineteen, simply says, *"So Abraham returned to his young men."* That's it.

There is a danger with this text, I think, to wrongly interpret Abraham as inhuman. He simply obeys without question, like a robot. But when we make Abraham a robot, we turn faith into a cold, dead thing instead of a living trust in a living God from a living, human person. The text doesn't say Abraham didn't question. The text just doesn't give us Abraham's questions. I do not want to speculate about Abraham's prayers before, during, and after this divine test, but I do want to point out the silence.

You know the silence. If someone were to write down an account of some of the things God has asked you to go through, some of the tests He has put in your path, observers might not see the wrestling, and the prayers, and the questions. They might just see your actions, like Genesis 22. But you know that it's never that easy. You've been tested and you've questioned and you've wrestled with the Lord. You've asked Him many things over the years. Has He answered you satisfactorily? Maybe. But more often than not, it would seem to us that God is silent.

That's what strikes me most about Genesis 22. God is silent when it comes to explanations and answers. While Abraham, and Isaac for that matter, undoubtedly had many questions, God does not answer any of them. Why would God call Abraham at the age of 75 (Genesis 12.4), promise to bless all the families of the earth through him (12.3), wait to give Abraham a son until Abraham was 100 and barren Sarah was 90 (17.17 and 21.5), promise to make that son a great nation (17.16), and then take that son away? Why would God seem to mimic the false gods of Canaan and ask for a child sacrifice?

God is silent on those topics. Instead, God simply provides. He proves faithful. He had made promises to Abraham and He fulfilled them. So, at the end of the story, there is precious little on the lips of Abraham. He simply repeats the promise of God, *"God will provide. The LORD will provide;."* Even in the middle of the trial, God will provide. *"I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you"* (22.5). That's faith in God's promise to provide life in death. Hebrews chapter eleven says that Abraham, *"considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead"* (11.19). God will provide. *"So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide;' as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'" (22.14). "To this day" we have come and "to this day" it is true.*

Jesus is silent out there in the wilderness. Mark doesn't record a word, *"He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by the devil. He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him"* (1.13). We know from the other Gospel accounts that there was much more to it than that. Including the fact that this was not an isolated trial out in the wilderness, but His life and especially His death on the cross. God provided for Him, but God has also provided Him. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3.16).

If God has given us His Son, will He not also provide us with everything else? *"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"* (Romans 8.32). God provided for Abraham, not only in this instance at Moriah, but throughout his life. God has provided Jesus for us and this whole world. He is the blessing for all the families of the earth. May God move all the families of the earth to turn to Him and live! But for us, today, the promise is that God will continue to provide for us.

On the way up the mountain, the silence was anxious and heavy. It had to be. What was the silence on the way down? Peace and joy beyond words. You and I have these moments, as well, don't we? We speak to God in the silence. The questions arise but answers do not descend. Instead, God breaks the silence with His promises in Christ. He provides. He replaces our anxieties with a dependence and our fears with quiet confidence. In His Word and promises He gives us everything we will ever need.

Today, God provides again. His Son, His only Son, given for you. The One who was faithful in all the testing now comes to us and provides for us forgiveness, life, and salvation. As we receive Him today, we believe that God will, with Him, graciously give us all things.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Seeing God's Glory

Mark 9.2–9 for The Transfiguration of Our Lord (B) on February 11, 2018
Rev. Jonathan W. Rusnak for Pilgrim Ev. Lutheran Church in Wauwatosa, Wis.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction

I attended a funeral yesterday. My great-great-uncle, Fred, died from cancer at the age of 88. The funeral was at Concordia Chicago and the campus pastor preached. The pastor reviewed some numbers from Fred's life. 73: That's how many continuous years Fred spent at Concordia, beginning as a freshman in high school. 65: That's how many years Fred was employed in a professional capacity at Concordia. 17: The number of buildings built on that campus while Fred worked there. 7: The number of Concordia presidents Fred served under. But then the preacher did a wonderful thing. He proclaimed to us that all those numbers add up to 1. At the end of an amazing life of service, all that matters is 1: one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one Savior who conquered sin and death for Fred by grace.

We've all been to funerals like that; ones that point us to Jesus, many of them right here. We've also all been to the opposite kind of funerals; ones that point to the person and leave it all right there. Then, all the numbers add up to all the numbers. It's not by grace, anymore, but by works. That's a difference.

Funerals give perspective and that's what Transfiguration is for, too. Jesus is transfigured and He transfigures us. The last stanza of the last hymn today will say it well: "Lord, transfigure our perception With the purest light that shines, And recast our life's intentions To the shape of Your designs." So, Lord, let us see you the way you want to be seen, in the crucified and risen Jesus, in Your Means of grace, and let us see ourselves the way you see us, clothed in Christ and united to Him both now and forever.

Blindness and Sight

The contrast between funerals about Jesus and funerals about dead people reflects what St. Paul describes in our epistle lesson for today. On the one hand, *the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ*. In other words, all they see is themselves. On the other hand, *God, who said "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*. In other words, all we see is Jesus.

That's a whole lot easier said than done, though, isn't it? It's one thing to get it right at a funeral, when it's all said and done, but are we getting it right today? Are we seeing God's glory, that is, His presence and His activity, where He wants to be seen, that is, in His Word and in His meal, or are we searching for Him out there in the darkness somewhere, trying to make all the numbers add up? It is a challenge every day to ignore so much of what we *see* and walk instead by *faith* in Jesus, to trust that the Lord is present and active in every moment: joy and challenge, accomplishment and failure, comfort and suffering.

It was a challenge for the disciples, as well. They saw God's glory *in the face of Christ*. He looked like God, then, radiant and powerful. They hear the voice, "*This is my Son. Listen to Him.*" Peter wanted to stay because Jesus had been talking about a cross. This mountain sounded way better. Light is better than darkness, population is better than rejection, pleasure is better than pain, celebration is better than suffering, and life is better than death. It's no question for Peter. It's no question for us, either. But that's why the Father yells down from heaven, "*Listen [not to yourselves but] to Jesus.*"

The Glory of the Cross

Jesus doesn't stay on the mountain, but pursues the valley so He can climb another hill. Our God doesn't stay up above the pain and the darkness of life and death. Two weeks ago, we heard Mark's account of Jesus' healing a man with an unclean spirit and we saw that Jesus has *divine authority*. Last week, we heard Mark's account of Jesus' healing Simon's mother-in-law, and many others, and we saw that Jesus has *divine compassion*. Authority and compassion come together in Christ who is not only transfigured on the mountain but goes down into the valley to the cross for us.

Here's Christ's story. We were blind, but God sought us out, found us, and rescued us, not through dazzling displays of power, the sort of thing we're looking for from God, but through suffering and death out of love for us. That is His glory. Not only did He see us and have compassion, He had the *power* to save. Not only does He have all power and authority in heaven and on earth, He has *compassion*.

Life through the Lens of the Cross

Now back to the hard part. How can we who have seen Jesus so many times still not be focused on Him? In a moment, we will climb a few steps, a little mountain, to commune with God Himself in all His glory, truly present with us and for us, forgiving our sin, strengthening our faith, and empowering our love for others. And then we walk out the door and go right back to seeing the world as if He isn't there at all.

English author H. G. Wells, who wrote *The War of the Worlds*, wrote a story called "The Country of the Blind." It's a story about a remote valley in Ecuador where everyone is blind because of a rare disease. Fifteen generations go by until there is no living recollection of sight or color or the world beyond that valley. One day, a hiker accidentally falls into that valley from a cliff. He realizes everyone is blind and tries to explain sight to them. They don't believe him. They think he is crazy. They go to their doctor. He says, in order to cure him completely all they need to do is a little operation to remove those things he calls his eyes. "Thank Heaven for science!" they say. But the man escapes. I tell you that because we can be like those people in the valley. Our spiritual blindness isn't so much that we can't see God, it's that we refuse to see Him where He puts Himself, and instead believe that we can see so much of Him in exactly the places and ways we want to see Him. In the end, all we're seeing is ourselves.

Why do we keep looking for God to show up in the form of health or financial security or comfort or a strong economy or a united nation or, dare I say it, a growing church? Why do we keep asking God to show Himself in things that benefit us? Because it makes sense. But Transfiguration is seeing God so clearly by faith where He wants to be seen and how He wants to be seen that we stop looking for Him where and how we want to see Him and start realizing that He's already there. He's not just up on the mountains. He's down in real valleys, the ones we walk through every day. He's there because He's with you. You are His glory, His presence and activity, to people in this world. So, "Lord, transfigure our perception With the purest light that shines, And recast our life's intentions To the shape of Your designs." That shape is the cross which means life is lived connected to Jesus and in love and service to those around us. It really is that simple. The numbers don't have to add up because we walk by faith.

Faith doesn't just change the way we see *our* lives. It changes the way we see each other. We are members of the Body of Christ. We receive Christ together. Therefore, God is present and active in our conversations, our friendships, and our prayers for each other. Psalm 89.15 says, "*Blessed are the people . . . who walk, O Lord, in the light of your face.*" By God's grace, you are that people. By God's grace, you are His Church, His Body. By God's grace, you are God's glorious light in this dark world.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.