
Radical Trust

A sermon by the Rev. Leigh Preston
Proper 8 – Year A

It is such a joy to be with you all this morning. I think the last time I was in this pulpit was nearly twenty years ago during a game of hide and seek at a youth lock-in—it made a great hiding place! I am honored to be preaching from this pulpit now, and I am grateful to Dean Candler for his gracious invitation.

Yesterday, I celebrated the tenth anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood, a service which took place here, and at which some of you were present. It wasn't the only significant occasion in my life to take place at the Cathedral. I was confirmed here as a teenager, and I married my husband here shortly before beginning seminary.

When I look back at these pivotal moments, I see this incredible space— the brilliant stained glass and the soaring ceiling, the beautiful woodwork and the stately columns.

But the Cathedral has been far more than just a backdrop for these important celebrations in my life. It was my regular participation in the life of this congregation that led me to those moments. The services on ordinary Sundays, the Wednesday evening choir rehearsals, the Friday night lock-ins, the summer pilgrimages and mission trips—these experiences helped to make me who I am today. They shaped and formed me as a child of God and a minister in God's church.

It's hard to choose one experience that has had the greatest impact on my life and ministry, but I've been thinking a lot lately about my first mission trip to Ecuador with the Cathedral youth group following my sophomore year of high school.

That trip instilled in me a passion for overseas mission, and for ministry among Latinos, in particular. I went on several other short-term mission trips, then discerned a call to be a long-term missionary, and with the prayers and support of this congregation and others, I served in El Salvador the year following my ordination.

Upon returning to the States, I served as priest-in-charge of a Latino congregation in Hartford, Connecticut. And now, after serving as an associate rector in two Anglo congregations, I will be joining the faculty at the School of Theology at Sewanee, as an instructor in Pastoral Spanish and Latino Ministry.

Over the years, I've learned that the journey of faith is full of surprises, and that following God's call may lead us to places we never expected to go.

Certainly, Abraham, the Father of our Faith, found this to be true. Now, I have to admit, when I saw the Old Testament reading assigned for today, I wondered if I could somehow get out of preaching, or if perhaps I should just hide in the pulpit, as I used to.

The story of the binding of Isaac is one of the most challenging and disturbing texts in all of scripture. I feel like I should issue a disclaimer up front: I am not going to resolve all of its difficulties this morning.

Scholars and people of faith throughout the centuries have wrestled with the questions this story provokes. What kind of

God would submit Abraham to the “test” of sacrificing his son? And how could Abraham willingly obey? Elsewhere in the Old Testament, we see that God abhors child sacrifice. In the books of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the practice is explicitly condemned. And in Micah, when a worshiper asks, “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?”—the prophet dismisses the need for child sacrifice, and says instead: “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6)

We may not be able to answer all of the questions raised by this story, but we can still find within it meaning and relevance for our own lives of faith.

In the version of the story we just heard, the lectionary skipped the first three words. The twenty-second chapter of Genesis actually begins with: “*After these things*, God tested Abraham.” The phrase “after these things” is not insignificant— it moves us to ask, “What things?” and to remember God’s call to Abraham to journey to an unknown land, and God’s promise to Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation.

As the story goes, Abraham obeys God’s call and leaves his home behind, but eventually, his faithfulness begins to waver. Twice he tries to pass his wife Sarah off as his sister in order to preserve his own safety, but God tells Abraham not to be afraid and reaffirms the promise.

“Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” God says. “So shall your descendants be.”

As the years stretch on, and Sarah continues childless, they doubt again, and they decide to take matters into their own hands. Abraham conceives a child with Sarah’s slave Hagar. But in spite of their lack of faith and patience, God does not give up on them. God sends holy visitors to tell Abraham and Sarah that, despite their advanced age, they will still have a child.

At long last, Sarah conceives and gives birth to a son, and their hearts are so filled with joy that they call the boy “Isaac” or “Laughter.”

“*After these things*, God tested Abraham.”

Biblical scholar Ellen Davis suggests that God imposes this one-time test on Abraham, because so much depends upon this one man. Abraham and his descendants are the means by which God has chosen to bless the entire world. And God wants to know whether or not Abraham is faithful. Can God trust Abraham? And does Abraham trust God?

The answer, of course, is yes. Abraham passes the terrible test.

He takes Isaac to the place God had shown him, he builds an altar and lays wood for a fire, and he binds his son and places him on top of the wood. But at the last possible moment, God intervenes. An angel calls out to Abraham and says: “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

When Abraham notices a ram caught in the thicket, he offers it as a sacrifice instead. And he names the place: “The Lord will provide.”

This story, as difficult as it may be, teaches us about deep vulnerability and radical trust. After all the times he doubted and tried to take matters into his own hands, Abraham has finally learned to trust completely in God. Looking back, he can see that God has always upheld God’s promises, and that God has always provided for him. And so, he is willing to do whatever God asks of him, and to risk that which is most dear to him, because he believes that God will continue to be present and to provide for him.

Earlier this month, I attended a Latino ministry training, held at the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest in Austin. What began as an academic course became a pilgrimage when we traveled as a group to San Antonio and Laredo to learn more about the issue of immigration, in particular.

We met with churches and social service organizations to learn about their work within Latino communities. We met with Border Patrol agents to hear about their efforts to secure the border and respond to the humanitarian needs they encountered. And we met with a woman from Honduras who had crossed the border several years ago.

Her name was Frances, and she told us of her dreams for a better life and the lack of opportunities in her native country. “Dreaming is one thing,” she said. “To have opportunities in another.”

She made the difficult decision to leave her home and her family, and she began the treacherous journey to the north. She traveled by foot, by train, and by bus.

Her shoes wore out quickly, so she made much of the journey barefoot, and her money ran out even more quickly, so she often went hungry.

When she and her fellow travelers made it to Mexico, they were robbed, kidnapped, and held in captivity for several days. Through a cunning plan, or simply by the grace of God, they were able to escape unharmed, and to continue on their way. Frances ended up settling in Mexico for a while—she got married and started a family there—and then they moved to Laredo several years later.

Throughout her story, Frances spoke of her abiding faith in God and her complete trust in God’s presence and provision in her life. “If you don’t have God in your heart,” she told us, “You don’t have anything.”

She discovered that often God provided for her through the generosity and kindness of strangers. She told us of one rainy night on her journey, for example, when she found a covered porch where she could take shelter and stay dry as she slept.

When the owner of the house opened his door the next morning, he was startled by the sight of a woman sleeping in a garbage bag poncho at his feet. But instead of shooing her off the porch, or worse, he invited her inside and made her a cup of coffee. Both of them were vulnerable in this moment—Frances had to depend on the mercy of her host, and her host risked his safety and shared what he had for her sake. God was surely present in this encounter.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me,” says Jesus, “and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.”

“And whoever gives even a cup of cold water”—or perhaps a cup of hot coffee—“to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple” . . . will not lose his reward.

Frances’s faith may sound naïve—after all, her story could have had a much different, and more tragic, ending. How could she maintain such deep and enduring trust in God?

Perhaps it was precisely because of her vulnerability that she was able to recognize God’s grace and love.

She had learned, like Abraham, that everything she had—that her very life and all she held dear— was a gift from God. And she believed that if God had journeyed with her this far, then surely God wouldn’t abandon her now.

I think it’s easy for us—when things are going well, and when we have a feeling of power and control in our lives—to lose this sense of trust and belonging. We forget that we are utterly dependent upon God, and upon each other. It’s when we’re vulnerable—either by choice or by circumstance—that we are better able to recognize God’s presence and provision.

We worship a vulnerable God—a God who chose to become incarnate, and to live and die as one of us—a God who promises to be present whenever we welcome and care for one another—a God who, in spite of our sin and disbelief, continues to love and forgive us.

When we embrace our own vulnerability, we are able to enter more deeply into relationship with God, and to recognize and give thanks for all the ways that God has blessed and cared for us. We are able, like Abraham and Frances, to trust in God’s grace and love.

This morning, I give thanks for this congregation in which I came to understand the depth of God’s love for me and began to discern God’s call in my life. And I pray for each of you, that wherever your journey of faith may lead you, you will trust in God’s goodness and experience God’s blessing every step of the way.