

Good Sunday morning from a cloudy hill in Rockport.....

These weeks of pandemic panic don't seem to be getting any easier, do they? We long to get back together, in person. We long to take off our masks when we go out in public. We long to return to "normal," whatever that means for each of us. And yet, not yet.... if ever again.... In the midst of all this angst and anger, uneasiness and unsureness of much of anything, is there any word we can hold in our minds and hearts, and hear in our ears and speak from our lips to make a difference? Mercy. How about mercy? In the midst of words of shaming and shouting, can we proclaim for ourselves and all those around us, MERCY! "Have mercy on us, O God," for we are sometimes not such nice people. Sometimes we fall short of being our best selves. Sometimes we point fingers at others, and still don't see them pointing back at ourselves, too. As Sue Monk Kid reminds us at the end of this simple worship service (scroll down), sometimes we need to go to back to our corner of the ring and have someone dab mercy on our beat-up and anxious spirits. We need a brief timeout....

And with that in mind, do you like ice cream? When was the last time you had an ice cream sandwich? How about Sunday, July 19th at 3 p.m. in the church parking lot.... with a rain date of Sunday, July 26th. Bring your lawn chair.... Wear your mask (except when you're eating your ice cream!).... Stay six feet apart from one another.... and we'll have some ice cream together, in person, but not too close to one another. If you're up for it, send me an e-mail at susanstst@aol.com to let us know you'll be there so we will be sure to have enough ice cream sandwiches to go around.

It isn't wise for us to resume Sunday church services in our sanctuary at this point, but perhaps having some ice cream together in our parking lot will hold us over until we can return to worship together in the manner to which we are accustomed and long for once again.....

Blessings to all this cloudy Sunday morning of Summer..... Susan

p.s. I have downloaded this morning's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page: [freerangepastor](https://www.facebook.com/freerangepastor) for anyone who wants to tune in.... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermon to Federated's Facebook page....

p.p.s. A few of you have taken me up on my offer to come chat with you in your yard or open garage, on your porch or deck, etc..... wearing one of my many masks, bringing my own libation, and carrying my own lawn chair.... and maybe bug net, too! Be in touch if you're interested – call me at 207-322-1948 or send me an e-mail to freerangepastor@gmail.com.....

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, June 28, 2020
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

Opening Prayer

We come to worship, from afar, not side by side,
seeking sustenance and comfort,
companionship and safety from the trials of life.
We come expecting to be uplifted,
and yet sometimes we are challenged.
We come with faith mingled with doubt,
with assurance mingled with questions.
In the midst of it all we come to know and be known by God
even in the midst of a pandemic
keeping us apart in body, but not in spirit.....
Let us worship!

A Meditation....

The spiritual life is about more than the repetition of spiritual exercises.
It demands commitment to discovering the essence of life.
It requires the perseverance it takes to try and try again
to find the way that is most life-giving for us....
one community, one guide after another, if necessary,
until we find ourselves truly alive spiritually, truly at home.
It is about being open to every moment, however incomplete,
because every moment in life has something to teach us
about what it means to live well.
It is about realizing that sometimes the perfection of the moment
lies in accepting its imperfections.
βJoan Chittister
in *Welcome to the Wisdom of the World*

A Reading of Scripture – Genesis 22:1-19

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him,
“Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.” And He said, “Take your son, your

favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.”

So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, “You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.”

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he answered, “Yes, my son.” And he said, “Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” And Abraham said, “God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” And he answered, “Here I am.” And he said, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to harm him. For now I know you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.” When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by his horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham named the site Adonai-yireh [or the Lord will see] whence the present saying, “On the mount of the Lord there is vision.”

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command.” Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.

Genesis 22:1-19 (a new translation of the TANAKH
according to the Traditional Hebrew Text from the Jewish
Publication Society)

**A sermon based on Genesis 22:1-19
“....and God tested Abraham”**

Will you pray with me. Holy God, your lessons for us are sometimes so startling they take our breath away. Help us to hear the *many messages* of our text for today and not become blinded by the *graphic details* of it. Amen.

Have you ever been tested? Yes, I know we've all been tested in school many times – to get a passing grade, to move to the next level of study. And yes, we are tested in our work settings, passing annual reviews, getting ready to move to new levels of achievement in our chosen fields. But, personally.... have you ever been tested? My guess is most, if not all of you, have been tested personally many times.... in your families.... with your health.... through your faith and your doubts....

In our text for today from Genesis, Abraham is tested in the most dramatic way he, or we, could imagine. God asks him if he is willing to give up his own son, his favored son, as a burnt offering to God. It's a chilling scene, isn't it? And, as I said before I read the passage, one most preachers do not touch with a ten-foot pole.

What kind of a god *would ask a parent* to give up their own flesh and blood, their beloved child, to prove a holy point, to test their holy loyalty?

What kind of a father *would be willing to commit* such an atrocity?

What kind of a faith tradition would offer to its followers such a *dramatically awful vision* as this one?

It is with these kinds of Bible passages and these kinds of questions that I am most drawn to the Jewish way of understanding them, and that is because in the Jewish way *many* avenues are explored. *No* questions are left unasked. A *variety* of different interpretations are offered for a particular text. No one understanding is declared to be the "right one," or the only way the text could possibly be explained.

This way of interpretation is called midrash, and it has been used faithfully by Jewish rabbis for many centuries. I love midrash – because it gives us the opportunity to consider a text, particularly like the one for today, with eyes and minds wide open.

There is a book about midrash that can help us all think about reading texts from the Bible with refreshed eyes, and a willingness to be open to the possibility that there are ways to interpret the holy word that we've never considered before.

From this book about midrash, "Amos Oz, a renowned Israeli author, once remarked, 'Fundamentalists live life with an exclamation point. I prefer to live my life with a question mark.' The rabbis turned the text and turned it again. They delighted in reading the Bible with question marks to discover not just what the Bible *meant* but what it *continues to mean*. They entered into dialogue with the text and added another voice in the room. And it was from these voices and question marks that they wrote midrashim."^[1] (emphasis added)

Midrash doesn't proclaim, as the bumper sticker does, "The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it!" Midrash teaches that the Bible is an astounding collection of stories that offers us a myriad of understandings of faith... of the humanness of our frailties as they are met by the compassionate nature of an all loving God. Midrash teaches us to say with the rabbis, "The text says *this*, but it could have meant *that*, or *that*, or *that*!"

The author of this book on midrash I've been reading is Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso. She tells of a woman in her congregation who gave her own interpretation of the story of the binding of Isaac as she believed it related to her story. This is her own modern midrashic interpretation of the text. "This woman's husband was a quadriplegic and was undergoing serious surgery. The story of the binding of Isaac is read in the synagogue each year on the holy day of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New year. The woman's words give new meaning to a difficult narrative. [They go like this,]

'Each year as the Jewish New Year approaches, I wonder why it was decided by the rabbis that we should read the story from Genesis about Abraham and his family. I believe it is to remind us that each of us climbs a mountain, as Abraham climbs Mount Moriah, sometimes individually, sometimes with others, but always alone. Though we never know what is at the top until we get there, I think the story is God's way of reminding us that the ram is always there. And God is always there.

[She goes on] I sat in the hospital room not knowing for sure what the results of the surgery would be. I held on to that faith that Abraham had when he climbed that mountain with Isaac, not knowing what was going to happen or how it was going to all turn out. But he had faith and that gave him strength to get past that moment, to believe in the best outcome. I wasn't denying that things could go wrong or that the outcome might be different from my best prayers. It was just believing in the presence of that other power and gaining strength from that belief.

Perhaps the reason for reading the story of Abraham and Isaac at the beginning of the Jewish New Year is not to remind us of Abraham or Isaac but to remind us of the mountain – the journey. [She continues] when I really began to look into the different thoughts on the story, I began to realize how different each person's journey is. Isaac's journey was not the same as Abraham's; his was not the same as Sarah's; and the servants who accompanied them had an even different experience. They made the journey together, and yet separately.

We read the story together. All ears listen to the same words, perhaps hearing different things, but we are all together in the reading. So really we aren't alone as we

climb. I have learned that during this crisis in my life. Just as Abraham had his servants waiting for him, there are many hearts and hands waiting for us, ready to help.” [From a letter written by Sue Baker, member of Congregation Beth El Zedeck, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2006]^[2]

Perhaps the questions for us this morning are four fold:

Are we willing to take the risk to be tested in new ways in our every day lives, especially when our days right now are anything but “every day.”

Can we take courage from holding on to the holy stories of our sacred ancestors as lanterns shining the way into unknown futures, made even more unknown by the pandemic hovering over and around us all?

Are we ready to climb whatever mountains lay before us, knowing we do not climb those mountains alone?

God tested Abraham and found a loyal follower.

God tested a Jewish woman and her sick husband and found believers in God’s mercy.

And here’s the fourth question -- how is God testing you and what will God find in you?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

**A Prayer from Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar
of the New England United Methodist Church
for Sunday, June 28, 2020
based on Genesis 22:1-19 & Matthew 10:40-42**

God of the Ages,
as you gave the ram for the sacrifice,
as you made a way for our mothers and fathers,
for Abraham and Sarah and the long line of the faithful, and
as they trusted in the Word that they did not fully comprehend,
as you journeyed with them into a future they could not see,
as your Spirit sustained Jesus in the wilderness
where he was tempted but did not forsake you,
as Jesus instructed his followers by his example to love,
as he gave us the gift of abundant life ...

so give us faith to believe in your promise that we do not fully see or comprehend,
so make us strong to resist evil in whatever guises it presents itself,
so make us willing to stretch out our hands in the name of Jesus
to offer hospitality to the stranger,

to give a cup of water to the little ones, to welcome the outcast.

Restore in us, oh God, the faith
you gave Abraham, “Jehovah-Jireh” (God will provide);
restore in us the faith that you give us now;
restore in us the faith that You will provide to all generations,
that the sacrifice and the reward will be given and received.
In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

To hold in our prayers this day.....

Please hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus.... and all those affected, which should be every one of us, by the cruel condition of racism....

From our most recent bulletin and more....

Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, Muriel’s grandson Jared and niece Pam, and Jackie’s 92 year old friend Genevieve Micali.... *Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

A Benediction *

*May God bless you and keep you.
May God’s face radiate upon you and flood you with grace and tender mercies.
May God smile upon you always and cover your lives with peace.
Amen.*

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

for Sunday, July 5, 2020

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17;
Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Words to ponder today.....

*“Mercy is the golden chain by which society is bound together.” ~ William Blake,
19th century*

*“The world will give you that once in a while, a brief timeout; the boxing bell rings
and you go to your corner, where somebody dabs mercy on your beat-up life.”*

~ Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, 21st century

^[1]Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *Midrash, Reading the Bible with Question Marks*, Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2013, p. 17.

^[2]*Ibid.*, p. 25-27.