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Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
February 28, 2021 Streaming Mass
Second Sunday of Lent Year B Genesis 22: 1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18

What kind of faith does it take to transform jet planes into weapons of mass destruction killing almost 3,000 innocent people? What kind of "god" would require, would demand, such an act of his followers? What kind of person would think that God would, in fact, reward him for performing such a deed? This September we will observe the 20th anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11. The perpetrators of that atrocity did in fact believe that they were performing a godly, righteous act. In no way do I wish to say that most Muslims would endorse that way of thinking, but those terrorists did believe they were doing God's will. Turning to today's reading, it is indeed a troubling text. What kind of faith would require of you to kill your own child and think you were offering a worthy sacrifice to God? What kind of "god" would ask such a violent, such a cruel, inhuman act? What kind of person could actually think that by performing such an act, they were doing something good, something holy? Yet this story of Abraham, asked to slay his son, is central for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the three monotheistic religions that claim two billion of the world's population. Is this the sort of violent God we are asked to believe in?

The charge has been made--and it has some merit--that the world's monotheistic religions, Judaism Christianity and Islam, have done grievous harm in seeming to legitimize violence in the name of religion. That the God worshiped by Jews, Christians and Muslims seems to permit, even encourage, the use of violence to pursue the goals of making converts from unwilling peoples, or liberating sacred sites occupied by those worshipping another "god (the Crusades)--both employing the force of arms in the advancement of what is seen as some noble and worthy cause. This is what is known as "sacred violence"—the belief that our "god" wants us to use force to achieve some good end. It is not surprising, for human beings have often twisted religious ideals to serve their own purposes.

Much of the justification for "sacred violence" can be found in the Bible, in the Old Testament. And there is no getting away from it—the Old Testament is a very violent book. Especially in its early sections, because the people God is working with there are a very violent people. We have to remember that many of the stories and episodes in the early sections of the Bible go back to the Bronze Age, back to the very beginnings of civilization when people are emerging from savagery to something more humane. What we have to do is take the long view—to see that the entire Old Testament is about God fashioning a people, a people who will in time become "a light

unto the nations”—a people who will develop and exhibit a profound sense of justice and compassion, something that was unique in the ancient world. But it took a long time for God to accomplish this. Context is crucial in understanding these stories.

God takes these people where they are at, amidst all the savagery of their time, and over many centuries, particularly through the prophets, reveals God’s true nature—not the avenging warrior God, as their ancestors depicted God in the early sections, but the God who gradually reveals himself as one of unconditional love for all human beings, the God who will be most fully revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the One whom we are told in today’s Gospel to “listen to,” for He is the One for whom all of the Old Testament has been preparing. The Bible is the inspired word of God, but it is the revelation of God in human language, in human concepts and categories. So, the challenge for us is to see a development, an evolution, in the clarification of who and what God is really like, and to recognize the limitations of the inspired human authors of the Scriptures as they gradually moved beyond their narrowness to a more expansive view of God.

The whole point of the story is to show that the true God of Abraham is not like any of the “gods” of his pagan neighbors, who would indeed demand such a terrible act. This story of Abraham is a turning point in the revelation of who God is for the Jews. At first glance in this story God appears somewhat fickle, if not schizophrenic. First God asks Abraham to kill his son. Then He says, “No, that’s not what I want.” If we were to read this text in the original Hebrew, it becomes clear how it is Abraham, not God, who undergoes a change, a change in understanding the very nature of God, and consequently what God is asking of him. In the passage we have read today, two very different names for God appear—“Elohim” and “Yahweh.” The crucial point is to recognize that these two different names represent two very different understandings about God. In the verse where Abraham is asked to slay his son, the name for God is “Elohim.” “Elohim” is the primitive name for God in the Old Testament—a God who is seen as essentially a tribal God—a “god” for us against them. In the verse where Abraham is told to spare his son, the name for God is “Yahweh.” “Yahweh” is the name for the God who will inspire the prophets to announce a revolutionary message of social justice and peace for all peoples.

So, to return to the story, it is this tribal God “Elohim,” that initially Abraham thinks he is hearing, and for whom he is prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In the context of that time, human sacrifice, even child sacrifice, was not that unusual among those who worshipped the various tribal gods. The rationale was that one would offer to the gods what was most precious in order to receive a blessing from the gods. In the middle of the story Abraham is depicted as now hearing the voice of “Yahweh,”

who is not some mere tribal deity, but the God who embraces all humanity and all humanity's concerns. Abraham hears "Yahweh" and then refuses to listen, as would his contemporaries, to "Elohim," the god of the tribe. Instead Abraham listens to the God who tells him to spare his son. It is Abraham's faith, his trust in this God, "Yahweh," for which Abraham is blessed, for which he will become the "father of many peoples."

The gods of the tribe—the gods who embody the cultures of their day, whether millennial ago or today; the gods who embody the fears, the strivings, the enmities, the insecurities of their worshipers—these gods say "Yes, kill your son; sacrifice what is most precious to you; that will prove your dedication and devotion." But Yahweh, the God who transcends every tribe and nation, the God who will teach His people to fear not, to hate not, to envy not—this God commands Abraham to spare his only child, and in so doing reveals to humanity a totally different way of imagining God than what had existed before. And that is why this story is so central in the development of our religious understanding of who God is, and what God asks of us.

Let us pray that all descendents of Father Abraham, all those of the Abrahamic faiths---Jews, Christians and Muslims---will have that same trust of Abraham and move beyond the "gods of the tribe"—the "god" who blesses us and curses our enemy, the "god" who would urge us to kill for a supposedly righteous cause. Let us pray that we can all be heirs to the tradition of the prophets who announced God's will of justice, mercy and peace. Let us pray that we not succumb to the temptation to invoke God for our own political ends, and remember that God is not with us only, but with all of us, with all of humanity. That is the faith of Abraham that we celebrate this morning. This is the faith that "justifies," the faith that makes things right between God and every single human being on this earth.