

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

From the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, today we hear one of the most provocative and well-known narratives from the Bible. Abraham, who has for the past ten chapters of Genesis has been developing a relationship with God, is commanded to do something so horrible, so outrageous, that we can't even believe that God would ask it of him. What is God thinking?! We might ask. What kind of test is this?! We hear right up front that God is testing Abraham, and maybe that should give us a clue that God doesn't really intend to have the boy Isaac killed, that it is just a test of Abraham's obedience. But what a test! Is it pass-fail, do you suppose? Will Abraham need to pass this exam in order to graduate? In order to have this relationship with God, must Abraham be willing to sacrifice that which is most important to him, that which he loves, that only son? What does God require of him? What was God thinking?!

What is Abraham thinking?! Well, the story gives us no idea. You would think, wouldn't you, that Abraham would have some verbal response to God, some request for clarification, some complaint that just too much was being asked of him. But instead he silently does what God commands, and the silence is frankly deafening. Abraham seems to suspend his curiosity, his disbelief, his outrage. He even seems to suspend his ethics, being apparently willing to head off into the distant unknown and commit a deed which is clearly wrong in every way. Without a peep. Without a thought. I can't help thinking that Abraham is in fact testing God, in a way. How far will God go just to acquire proof of Abe's loyalty? Is this some monumental cosmic game of chicken? Who will flinch first? Who will be the first to stop and say "No, I can't go through with this!" God flinches first, but not before Abraham has demonstrated his faithfulness, not before Abe, knife handy and ready, has offered all that he has to the voracity of their covenant.

The Abrahamic covenant, the relationship between this first Hebrew patriarch and God Almighty, began with God's own offer. God offered a promise, an intention, a vision, to the humans which God's love had created. God offered first. God loved first. Specifically, the offer to Abraham and his family was for property, progeny, provision, and protection. Those four "pros" were benefits for which the ancients longed. We still long for them today. Property, that is to say, land, a land where we can put down our roots, locate ourselves and be grounded, was the first of the promises God offered to Abraham. In a wider sense, our "property" is the creation. We are physical beings, and need a physical place in which to exist. The quality and quantity of that place, that property, is a gift from God. It belongs to God, and it is created and offered to us by God's generosity. The second promise God makes in covenant with Abraham is progeny. God has offered that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in heaven, that though they will face hardship, they will know God as their champion and lover. The third promise of the Abrahamic covenant is that these descendants will be provided for, that they will be able to thrive, perhaps even become prosperous if they put their minds and back into it. And the fourth "pro" offered by God is protection. The descendants of Abraham will be reassured not to fear, as long as they faithfully respect the covenant.

Property, progeny, provision, and protection, and all of these are put into jeopardy that day in Moriah, when Abraham is challenged to show just how far he would go, how much he would risk to put on the table in order to be in relationship, in covenant, with God. But when God challenges us to a test, even if it seems to be a curious game of chicken, I think it isn't just obedience God hopes to see. A test can also be a learning experience, and our minds and hearts can be changed. Being in covenant with God proves not just the benefits of obedience, or skill, or knowledge, or loyalty. I have it on good Biblical authority that covenant with the divine can become a pathway to wisdom, to the inner inflammation of that spark of divinity embedded there by God in creation, that wisdom which is the most precious promise of all. For its flame enlightens all other benefits and relationships. Wisdom, enveloped in love, elevates our hearts and minds for the facing of

our days. As Abraham and God do this dance together in the Book of Genesis, despite the occasional misstep, they begin to move together reliably and harmoniously. And Abe learns to let God lead, trusting that God knows the next step, the next graceful move.

As they stand there on the dance floor, God approaches Abraham and invites him to dance. And Abe says "Here am I". That is BTW the recognized Biblical response of faith, used many times by potential leaders and prophets. Here am I. It indicates that we are ready to dance, to take a risk if necessary, to go into the unknown, to ignore all other distractions and suitors, to be God's partner in a special covenant. For all the other things with which scripture may be credited, it certainly is devoted to telling us how wise, how filled with wisdom, that choice is. To accept God's invitation to dance, even when we think we're much more comfortable as a wallflower. When Martin Luther King, Jr. had completed his studies at Morehouse College and Crozier Divinity School in Pennsylvania, he was accepted into the doctoral program at Boston College. He had earned a reputation as a bright scholar and a man of outstanding character. He was surely destined for comfortable leadership employment at some wealthy, prestigious parish here in the Northeast. But he began to feel nudged to return to Alabama, to his roots, where he thought God might need him more. He began to believe that God was calling him into that particular covenant instead. He and Coretta discussed it, prayed about it, and came to the conclusion that this was an authentic call, perhaps even a desperate call, and Martin looked God in the face and said "Here am I". And, of course, the rest is history. And, of course, that spark of divinity which had been embedded in him came to enlighten many to also hear God's plea.

There is a scriptural phrase in the Old Testament Book of First Chronicles which is familiar liturgically to many Episcopalians. In the King James Version it reads "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." It is part of a public prayer that King David says before the people when is soliciting their contributions toward the building of an elaborate new temple dedicated to God. He is reminding God, and them, that God has offered everything, put everything on the table, in the covenant made with Israel. And that the faithful response is to reply "here am I", that all that I am, and all that I have, is placed back on the table by our intent. This is what covenant with God looks like. It is not just a contract, it is not just a compact, but a relationship of shared vision. This is the kind of relationship Abraham and God have been working out. The boy Isaac is everything that Abe loves, and he is a gift of God's heart. Having been given this gracious gift, Abraham now has the authority to offer it back to God. To offer his only son to the shared vision of the covenant. And though Isaac isn't killed, he is dedicated by Abraham, and God, to the intentions of that covenant. That through him the dance with God will continue to coming generations.

When we finally are able to gather back in our church building, one of the first things we will do, if I have my way, is to renew our baptismal vows. While it doesn't come up specifically in those vows, the prayer "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee" is the essential intent of baptism. Our initiation into the covenant of faith is grounded in the response of faith, "Here am I". Here I am to risk a journey into the unknown as an ambassador of love. Here I am to spread the good news. Here I am to offer back the talents and the wisdom and the benefits with which the covenant has rewarded me, for the vision of a world healed by love. And I vow to share that vision with all that I am and with all that I have. Jesus sent the disciples out to be representatives of his name and his mission, and I want to do the same. He said that they would occasionally be welcomed, and occasionally not, but that even the act of offering a drink of water to any of them would be a sign that the covenant is spreading and growing. I hope that you will renew your vows daily, to respect the dignity of all people, to condemn wickedness, to repent when you have lapsed from God's presence, and to faithfully promote the gracious dance with God. Amen