



## The Look of Obedience

### Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8A , July 2, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Very Rev. Holladay Sanderson

[Genesis 22:1-14, Psalm 13, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42](#)

I have been pondering our lessons since late last Sunday, as I usually do. The story of the Binding of Isaac is not generally a favorite passage of mine to explore with its patina of child sacrifice overlaid with the sacrifice of Jesus himself; the stories of the only son and the only Son... And both were in the name of obedience.

Late this week, I was FINALLY finishing up with clearing away some of my book and paper debris before setting off on my 6-week journey to North Carolina. I have also been clearing away old DVR programs, both set to record and those saved, before being away from that center of streaming.

I ran across the funeral of Queen Elizabeth's Committal Service at St. George's in Windsor... and watched the recording again. It was brief and to the point and, at the end after the committal of this Christian soul to God, we were focused on THIS particular Christian soul and her life of service, even as the symbols of that service were removed from her casket. We were focused on her obedience and her faith. Here was a woman who lived in the lap of immeasurable privilege yet she pointed her life like a laser so as to devote her life to her vows to God and country.

So then I remembered... as my mind does sometimes move in odd directions... the thrust of one of the questions on my General Ordination Exam back in 2001. The Board of Examining Chaplains was asking us to discuss what our Book of Common Prayer means by "perfect freedom," using Moses and the Ten Commandments at Sinai after the fire and flame on Sinai and the ensuing Golden Calf incident, in comparison and contrast to the Prayer for Peace on page 99. "O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom."

"To serve you is perfect freedom," versus, using the very memorable words of my Old Testament professor who is now at Duke University, Ellen F. Davis, "Obey me/God or I will drop the mountain on you." I have NEVER forgotten that description of God's power at Sinai.

So what is perfect freedom?

What was perfect freedom as Elizabeth made her life decisions? Was perfect freedom at work in Jesus's decisions? Mary, his mother, exercised perfect freedom, didn't she? So this morning we have Abraham. What about his perfect freedom?

Think of what God is asking of Abraham. His long-awaited, God-promised son was FINALLY born when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. And now, to be a sacrifice? For what? Abraham does have a history of making shaky decisions; like the two times they went to Egypt and he passed his wife off to Pharaoh as his sister in order to preserve his own life. Luckily God was on Sarah's side because God afflicted Pharaoh before anything happened to her.

Abraham also took God's promise in his own hands and agreed with Sarah about sleeping with Hagar to have Ishmael (since time WAS marching on). We know from last week that God did give Ishmael a nation, too.

Then, there was the time when Abraham dickered with God about Sodom and Gomorrah, about just how many righteous people could be found there in order to save them from destruction. Yet today, Abraham doesn't go off on his own volition nor does he dicker with God. Though most likely filled with grief, he freely agrees to sacrifice his beloved son (whom we already know will not be sacrificed in the end). But Abraham does NOT know it. It seems that Abraham and God have grown a great deal in their relationship.

Now Abraham does not question God. He trusts God completely and agrees to do as God asks, much to Abraham's undoubted sorrow. The Pauline Letter to the Romans [4:3, 9] counts Abraham as righteous because of his obedience.

We cannot forget that during these times, the Ancient Near East was a place of acceptable child sacrifices. The Binding of Isaac ends ALL of that for the Israelites. The Torah is filled with sacrifices of all kinds of birds and animals, but no humans.

Jesus, in turn, ends ALL manner of sacrifices. Sacrifices in his era were for praise, for atonement, for returning to the community, for marking holy days, and so forth. But with Jesus' own action on the cross, sacrifices are needed no more. He said so in our Gospel back on June 11: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." [Matthew 9:13]

That message was repeated in the Old Testament lesson from Hosea that day: "For I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." [Hosea 6:6] Like Hosea, the prophets, those who afflict the comfortable so well, repeated the lessons we need to know about God's commands and the true intent of God enshrined in our hearts.

Isaiah repeats Hosea's lesson in chapter 1, verses 11 and 17 (but the entire passage is instructive.) "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats... ... learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."

By the grace and words of our scriptures and the ongoing, God-given truth and guide we receive from them, we can muse on the changing meaning of sacrifice from Abraham's time to today. We can muse on what it means to have the perfect freedom to obey what God commands.

Jesus sums it all up in our very brief gospel this morning. We have a call to welcome the Other, that one who is not ourselves. In welcoming that Other into relationship with us, we are welcoming the OTHER into relationship with our God who is all about relationship: about LOVING relationship.

We find ourselves this weekend in the midst of our celebratory national holiday season. And yet, we have been faced this week with challenging national headlines that affect the rights of many of our marginalized brothers and sisters. I encourage you to Google the Episcopal News Service: [www.episcopalnewsservice.org](http://www.episcopalnewsservice.org). Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, addresses these enigmas simply and eloquently with his ever-continuing and wise message of LOVE.<sup>1</sup>

In particular, in Curry's response to the Supreme Court's decision on affirmative action, he spoke eloquently of what we are pondering this morning: HOW we are to truly follow the one whom we are to obey... in perfect freedom. As Christians who are Episcopalians, we hear Curry's words and can recognize just how clearly they exemplify our own baptismal vows.

Curry says, "Our mandate as followers of Jesus is clear: to create the Beloved Community by facing painful truths from our past, learning from them, and then turning and joining hands together to right wrongs and foster justice and healing. In so doing, we can be and build that community and world where there is truly liberty and justice for all. This is the work of love."

The breadth of our call from God is enormous. We are called to LOVE God with all of our heart, soul, and mind and to LOVE our neighbors as ourselves. On these two commandments, hang ALL the law and the prophets. Our command is to love. And we follow that command in perfect freedom.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Presiding Bishop responds to Supreme Court's 6-3 decision to reject college admissions' affirmative action programs, By ENS Staff, Posted Jun 30, 2023.