

I have children on my mind today... Your children, my children, Abraham's children, a child named Mable who lives in Uganda. Mable's ten years old and I have been sponsoring her through Compassion International for four years. It mainly pays for her schooling.

"I love you..." she always says to me in her letters. I used to find that a bit curious. Now that I have been to Tanzania, I remember. East Africans always say that and mean it, because there is a relationship. In every church, every village, every meeting place, every venue our team visited in February, we were greeted with, "We love you...Be happy."

I think we don't say that enough to each other. It's not something I say easily, growing up in a family where spontaneous expressions of affection were rarely said. It's something I'm having to learn now, in my fifties, but I want to learn, so I'm going to try it this morning: I love you. Really. I've been rector here coming up on seven years and I do have genuine affection of you, so once again, let me say, I love you. Thank you.

Back to Mable. I had it all worked out that I would take two days at the end of our mission trip, fly to Rwanda, then motor up to the city in Uganda where Mable lives. I had the visa; the plane ticket; from Tanzania, I'd made arrangements on the phone with a lady in Rwanda who would have someone at the airport to meet me. It was all worked out.

But it did not come to pass. Who would have known that presidential elections in Uganda were taking place at that very time? 12,000 Ugandan troops were spread across the country, and darn it; the borders between Uganda and Rwanda were closed, with no clear indication when they would re-open. I go back to the Tanzania Compassion office and have a lengthy chat with the Director, who calls his Rwandan counterpart. At the end of the day, he advises, this will be a heartbreaking disappointment for Mable but it seems just too risky.

"Heartbreaking disappointment" Oh, how I struggled with that one! Last Monday, in the mail--- mail is slow coming from East Africa---there was a letter from Mable: "I love you. It is the rainy season. We're planting sorghum. I will be happy when you come to our home, Kabale, Uganda." One more heart breaking disappointment in a life with lots of disappointments on a continent where children are expendable, sometimes turned into soldiers at Mable's age...

or sex slaves. The fortunate ones find their own sponsors and manage to eat at least one meal a day.

Mable lives with her aunt; she's never mentioned her parents. I suspect they are dead, maybe of AIDS or malaria. Malaria, you know, is actually the #1 killer across the globe, followed by tuberculosis, and then AIDS. The everyday experience of the African is one of living with profound uncertainty about the future, where surviving *this day* is a triumph of the human spirit.

"Too risky" was the advice, and I decided not to make the journey. Still, I feel guilty about it. I am not as good or faithful or strong as Abraham, who made that horrible, frightful, gut-wrenching journey we hear about this morning (Genesis 22.1-14) "...God tested Abraham," the story says. "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

*What sound does the breaking of a heart make?* Surely this is a parent's worst nightmare. Unspeakable. Unimaginable. As a parent, I am horrified by this story. If this were my test, I'd flunk it. What kind of God---even if at the end he calls it off---is willing to put you and your child through this kind of trauma?

What was Abraham thinking...What was he feeling as they bundled wood, packed saddlebags, walked along? Was he brooding, silent, tense, for no apparent reason. Does he give Isaac sidelong glances, catch the sun hitting his hair? Does Isaac sense something different in his father? When does it dawn on him that he will be the sacrifice? Or does it? Is his trust so complete that he is perhaps confused but never alarmed?

God says, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love..." Well, that is not entirely true. You remember, Abraham really had two sons, the first son was Ishmael, born of an Egyptian slave girl named Hagar, because Abraham's wife, Sarah, was barren and that was the arrangement they made. Scripture records that Abraham was 86 years old at the time. Eventually though, the arrangement went sour and Sarah asked her husband to send both Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert, and God agrees.

This all happened after God had come to Sarah and Abraham when they were living in Ur of the Chaldees and said, "I know that you are old, tired and very prosperous, but you have no children. If you pack up and leave this place, where you have spent your entire lives, and go to a land that I will show you, I will make you the parents of a great nation." So they did. In their old age. And it was Isaac, when Sarah was 90, and Abraham was 100, that God said would be born to them. And you recall Sarah's response: She laughed. Which is what

Isaac means in Hebrew, *laughter*; because when you think about it, the whole thing is pretty funny. The term, "your only son", actually means *unique, one and only*. Isaac is God's provision for the future of the great nation that God had promised Abraham would be the father of.

So here is a man, who in order to fulfill the promise, is first asked by God, "Break with your past," which is something you don't ask of people in ancient cultures. And now God says, "Break with your future." Break with the future by sacrificing Isaac, who is the future.

There's an old Baptist hymn about "standing on the promises of God." Well, this story almost seems to be a perverse reversal of standing on the promises. This story feels like it is about *throwing away* the promises. Here is a man who had gone through an enormous disruption in his life. He's moved from his homeland. He's survived two famines. He's had all this trouble with his wife having children, even though God has promised him offspring---as many as the sands of the seas, the stars in the sky. He had one son, but God sent that one away. Now, he's got this one son, Isaac, and God says, "Kill him." There's something unconscionable about the way God toys with Abraham.

Have you ever felt that God was toying with you? Making it just too hard? Leaving you no options? Asking you to break with your past? And your future? Most of us spend a fair amount of time thinking about the future, with a reasonable assurance that we're going to have one. But a troubling xray, or a hurricane, or a famine, a war, or a hundred other things can whittle down our vision so that only the present, the here and now, the getting through this day matters.

Dreaming about the future is a gift a lot of people in this world never seem to be given, or can have taken away from them in an instant. And faith, we are told in the Letter to the Hebrews, is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." Because in that moment of having broken with the past and being asked to break with the future, there *really is nothing to see*.

A good friend called last week. She and her husband and son were part my congregation in Northern California. She's 49, a former registered nurse; her husband is a doctor. They found a lump in her breast; test results haven't yet come back but she saw the xray. "I know it's cancer" she tells me. "I know what it looks like." "How are you doing with that?" I ask. "I've got some options; we'll try this and if that doesn't work, we'll try that." "Sheila..." I said. She stopped mid-sentence, "I'm scared. I don't want to die." I think it's the separation, the isolation, the sense of abandonment we fear as much as anything.

Whatever it is, it's inevitable that each of us, in turn gets tested. But no test seems greater than the one put to Abraham. This is no simple story, even though it's tempting to look for a way to "tidy it up." There literally are hundreds of commentaries, opinions and theories and midrashes about it.

One says that Abraham knew all along that God was testing him and that in the end his son would be spared. Another claims that Abraham was testing himself to see how far he would go in obedience to this God, and to his horror, he found that he could go all the way. A third suggests, that, like Job, Satan came to God and actually he, Satan, was responsible for the test. Similarly, a fourth says that at the moment the ram was found in the thicket, Satan whispered in Sarah's ear that her son, Isaac, had been killed, and that is why the scriptural account has Sarah die immediately after this story.

A fifth claims that when Abraham went to take the ram from the brambles, he wept over it, held it, rocked it in his arms, a deranged old man, and that it was finally Isaac who had to slay it. A sixth says that Abraham came down from the mountain without Isaac, knowing that their ways had parted forever. A seventh says that Abraham will forever stand as the man of faith who tells us in this story what is terrible and what is wonderful in faith.

Midrashes, commentaries, and opinions notwithstanding, a ram somehow appears; an animal sacrifice replaces the human one, and then, in one final repetition of the promise, the story ends with the last words God ever speaks to Abraham. Or perhaps, from this time forward, Abraham never listens to God again. Because you don't go through this kind of thing without it changing the relationship.

*"God himself will provide a ram..."* Somehow, at the very last moment, out of the Blue, a ram appears. Last week, during Saturday's Quiet Day, Fr, Stuart Hoke described the chaos that ensued, and that Trinity Parish was in the midst of, as the Twin Towers collapsed on 11 September 2001. They need to evacuate the children in the Day School to Staten Island with no apparent means to do so, when *somehow...out of the Blue...at the very last moment...* two City busses appear.

We need to be really attentive when things appear 'out of the Blue.' God has a way of making things appear *somehow...out of the blue*. In a discussion last week on faith with a member of this congregation, I was reminded of the movie, "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. There is a scene in that movie, when Harrison Ford is being pursued by the bad guys and he comes to a chasm, where he can't run any farther, and where he needs to go is way on the other side of the chasm, And because he has no choice he finally just steps out, and the instant he steps out, a bridge appears.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things unseen. *Because we can't see what's next.* One thing faith certainly is not is certainty. It is anything but certainty, even though certainty is what we all would prefer. Faith is not a possession, not something we carry around in our back pockets, but a way of being in the world and a way of being in relationship with God, who does provide for us, but also tests us.

I think it is so poignant that Isaac was given a name that means *laughter*, because laughter is a close cousin to faith, a humble recognition that the significance of our lives is not left entirely up to us. God is busy, so we are not permitted to give up hope for ourselves or for the world, even when we see little evidence of God's action.

When we don't see evidence of God's action in our lives and in the world, the Biblical admonition would be, "Look harder!" *Because God is for us.* We didn't read the second lesson this morning from Romans but it is a famous passage, often read at funerals:

"If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us *everything else*?"

"...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or peril or sword? "

"If God is for us, who is against us?" In the 2500-4000 year span of history from the telling of the Isaac story to St. Paul writing down these words, there is a shift that occurs in humanity's understanding of the nature of God. God understands---or to put it better---we now seem to understand that God understands that there is only so much that can be reasonably expected of weak, fragile, limited, broken human beings. And God himself provides---or is it God provides himself? ---God himself bridges the gap, eliminates the distance, provides the extra amount needed, brings an end to the separation.

God himself provides the end to the separation in the person of Jesus, and invites us to invite him into our hearts and allow him to show us the way.

Which is why Paul is able to write so powerfully,  
 "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Amen.

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I am grateful to the following sources for insight into the Genesis 22.1-14 passage: *Our Father's Wells*, by Peter Pitzele, Harper Collins, 1995; *The Beginning of Desire- Reflections on Genesis*, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, Three Leaves Press, 1995; *Genesis-A Living Conversation*, Bill Moyers, Doubleday/Public Affairs Television, 1996.