

First Sunday in Lent

February 18, 2024 (Year B)



"In times of trial we should learn to judge, not by our feeling but by the Word of God. This Word promises us that every trial is only the eventide upon which the morning of comfort follows."

– Martin Luther –
On Isaiah 40

PROCLAMATION POINTS

The following are some thoughts and questions to be used for a text study on the weekly lessons, or for jump-starting the imagination of the preacher and hearer in preparing for the proclamation event.

Genesis 22:1–18

Abraham waited more than 20 years to have a son with his wife Sarah. Isaac was their pride and joy, and the answer to many prayers. In this difficult story we hear how God called for Abraham to take his son, Isaac, from Beer-sheeba to the mountain in Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering. It was a three day journey.

The writer of Genesis gives us no commentary on Abraham's inner response to the command, only what he did — which was to rise early and take Isaac along with two of his servants and head to the designated site. On the third day Abraham took the wood he had cut for the sacrifice, along with his beloved son and approached the place where God sent him. Only he and Isaac went to the site "to worship" (22:5). Isaac questioned his father about a lamb for the burnt offering. Abraham responded, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

- Why do you suppose Isaac fails to recognize that he is helping to prepare for his own sacrifice? Would you describe him as naive, trusting, or foolish?
- Abraham had an older son, Ishmael, by Hagar the maidservant. So why does God call Isaac, "your son, your only son?" (22:12) How does this highlight the seriousness of God's promise that Isaac would be the true heir?

It is so difficult to imagine following God's command to sacrifice one's child. Seemingly at the last second, God called out to Abraham praising him for his faith and obedience. God directed him to a ram in a thicket nearby, thus providing for the sacrifice as Abraham said he would.

- Does God really approve of human sacrifice? Though Abraham and Isaac did not, do you think God knew and planned that he would stop the sacrifice? Or do you take God's action as a last-minute change of mind?
- What clues from the story foreshadow the future sacrifice of God's one and only Son? In the atonement of Christ, how does God do what we cannot? In what sense does this story show us something about God's intentions and plans for salvation from the beginning?

Psalms 25:1–10

The psalmist sang praises to the Lord but in the same breath he asked that his faith and trust not be misplaced or "put to shame" (25:2). There are many references in the Scriptures where God declared that Israel would be put to shame for their lack of faith, idolatry, and treachery (e.g. Isaiah 1:29

and 20:5). The psalmist sought to know the ways of the Lord and to learn from him.

- How does knowing "the ways of the Lord" change the way we approach life? Why do those who do not know the Lord find that hard to believe?
- We tend to think of treason (v.2, treachery) as a political crime. What would you consider "treason" against God?

James 1:12–18

Enduring trials and suffering is a way of life for believers. From where does our courage come to face persecutions for the faith, physical trials, and the enemy's temptations? James gives us the answer, "the Father of lights" (1:17). This title is unique to James. It recalls the work God did at creation, creating the heavens and earth, making darkness light, and filling the whole world with his good gifts.

- How do trials help us as believers to have a deeper faith and stamina? How does darkness make the light even more clear and strong?

The English words "tempt" and "test" both translate the same biblical word *πειραζω* (*pieradzo*). From the story of Abraham, we know that God does *test* his people. But James makes it very clear that God does not tempt us to sin.

- What is the key to this distinction between testing and tempting? When in the midst of it, can we always tell the difference? Why must we take James' promise here on faith?
- What does James say is the cause of temptation? What happens when this is left to take root and grow?

Mark 1:9–15

St. Mark tells the story of Jesus' Baptism and subsequent temptation in the wilderness with amazing brevity. At his Baptism, Jesus received the audible blessing of God the Father. Immediately, he was thrust into the wilderness by the very Spirit of God, to a place where death was a very real possibility (Exodus 16:3). There, Jesus was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was not alone, however, the angels and animals tended to his needs.

- How does this story demonstrate the reality of God's Spirit being both affirming and comforting, but also the source of testing? How does this story show the difference between testing and temptation? (Hint: Consider the source.)
- Jesus was not alone. Who was with him? In what sense can we be assured that, in temptation, we are never alone?