



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 4
Proper 8 (A)
June 28, 2020

RCL: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Genesis 22:1-14

The Binding of Isaac may present one of the most well-known and most challenging stories of the entire Bible. Biblical scholars have wide-ranging methods of either discounting or explaining away the horrific image of God asking a father to sacrifice his son—a notion that is almost unthinkable to us. Rather than trying to justify or condemn this action, let me provide a bit of background and share a few ideas, and then, as people of faith, we will do what we have always done: We will prayerfully consider the story together and call upon the Holy Spirit to guide us to some deeper understanding of God through it.

First of all, we must remember that the first fruits have always belonged to God. This was true of the harvest, the cattle, and human offspring. In the Ancient Near East, human sacrifice was fairly common, and although it was slowly fading by the time Genesis was written, it was not unknown. The rationale was that everything we have is because of God's gifting it to us, and we are to return the first and best to God as a sign of thanksgiving. Given Sarah and Abraham's infertility, Isaac was not only the first-born but the miraculous and valuable first-born. God sets out to test Abraham's faith, and, through that testing, God provides Abraham with all he needs. Out of bareness, God provides a son. God tests Abraham's faith, and God provides the means to maintain blessing in the face of sacrificial testing.

- What does it mean to offer the first fruits of our lives to God?
- Without going so far as to glorify suffering, where has God provided for you in times of suffering?
- Does God test us? What is helpful or problematic about this strong Biblical theme? (See Job, or The Lord's Prayer—"lead us not into temptation.")

Psalm 13

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How many times in my life have I prayed this prayer? From the comparatively trivial times when the cop pulls me over for speeding, to the horrors of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, or the wildfires in Tennessee, there are times in life when it feels like God is far from us. Note that the psalmist believes that God has forgotten her "forever." For the psalmist, this is not a temporary blip on the weather radar, but a permanent state wherein she feels as if God's presence is so far removed that it will never return.

The psalms give us the incredible gift of raw, unvarnished human emotion. They remind us that God's love for us does not mean that we live in a world of perfection without pain and suffering. This idea of human suffering in the presence of a loving god—theodicy—has perplexed followers of God for thousands of years. Yet we, like the psalmist, are called to recognize that pain and still ring out our song to “praise the name of the Lord Most High.” There is no shame in lament, for God laments with us; therefore, the Lord's name be praised.

- When is a time in your life where you felt God was absent?
- How were you able, or were you able, to continue to praise God?
- How might lament bring healing in times of suffering?

Romans 6:12-23

This passage from Paul's most theologically dense letter always recalls images of the Exodus for me, and, in particular, Moses' farewell address in Deuteronomy 30. Having led the people out of bondage in Egypt, God offers the people a choice between “life and prosperity, death and adversity” (Deut 30:15). In summary, if the people love God and follow God's commandments, they will have life. If they do not, they will have death.

Likewise, Paul uses the imagery of slave either to sin or to righteousness. To our post-American slavery ears, this can sound harsh or even inhumane. We must never excuse or explain away the horrific sin of American slavery, but Paul means something different here. Just as God told the Hebrew people going into the Promised Land, God has given us teachings through the Law and through Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the Law, which will lead us into a place of life and abundance. In particular, this “free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23). Jesus' whole life, culminating in his death and resurrection, was a testament to the Law which he summarized as “You shall love the Lord your God with all our heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22:37–39).

- Where in your life are you a slave to sin?
- How might obedience to God deliver you from that position into life?
- Where is our church/town/state/nation a slave to sin, and how might obedience to God deliver us into life?

Matthew 10:40-42

These two verses at the end of Chapter 10 of Matthew conclude a treatise from Jesus to his disciples on the role of mission. Jesus gathers the twelve, gives them the powers of healing and exorcism, and sends them into the world to cast out demons and heal (Mt 10:1). Jesus then warns his disciples that in performing these acts of love, they will meet persecution and disdain.

Jesus still commands us, his 21st-century followers, to share the Good News of Jesus, which brings healing and life to the world. This may not make us popular, and neither will the work be easy. In these two verses appointed for today, however, Jesus reveals the rewards for those who are faithful. Notice that these rewards do not include wealth, fame, or worldly goods. Our reward is “the reward of the righteous” (Mt 10:41). God calls each of us to spread the Gospel in different ways—some are wandering prophets, some are teachers, some are even little children. All of us, however, carry the light of Christ and can take that light into the dark places of this world.

- What are your gifts, and how might you use them to spread the light of Christ?
- What brings you great joy? How might God use that joy to spread the Gospel?
- Where are the dark areas in your community that need the light of Christ?

This Bible study was written by Charles Lane Cowen in 2017.