

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

“Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”

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‘And Abraham rose up early in the morning, [...] and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.’

So begins the story which we know of as ‘The Testing of Abraham.’

‘On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar [...] And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My Father!” And he said “Here am I, my son.” And he said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a sacrifice, my son.”’

So begins the story which the Jews know of as ‘The Binding of Isaac.’

Two names for one story. Why do we call it ‘The Testing of Abraham’? Well it seems obvious, the story begins ‘*God did tempt Abraham*’, and indeed, is it not the ultimate test of faith and of the fear of the Lord to have Abraham destroy his beloved son, whom he had been promised? The son of all his hope?

Yet, why do the Jews call it ‘The Binding of Isaac’?

Well, it seems less obvious, but that is because we are cursed with the curse of punctuation, whereas the original Hebrew is not. Our translations read ‘*God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, comma, my son.*’ The Hebrew has no such

commas. Thus, it reads *'God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, that is, you, my son.'* Here, Abraham does not avoid the question of his son with euphemisms or slights of speech. He answers his son directly. God has provided Abraham with the sacrifice, and that sacrifice shall be his own son. So he tells his son, in all frankness, in all sadness, *'God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, and it shall be you, my son.'*

Then what is written? *'So they went both of them together.'* Together, they went. Now we see that this is not a story so much about the faith of Abraham, but the faith of Isaac; for it is Abraham who must offer his son, but it is Isaac, his son, who must in obedience to his father be offered. And yet Isaac accepts that he must be sacrificed. Thus, again, it is written: *'They went, both of them together.'*

In faith Isaac is bound, *as a lamb to the slaughter, yet he opens not his mouth.* In faith he does not resist the cords of his father's binding. In faith he flinches not at the knife; for in faith, he faces his death, believing, even as his father believed, *'accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.'*

But by a ram in the thicket was Isaac given back his life. By a lamb crowned with thorns was he restored to become *a blessing to all the nations of the earth.*

What shall we then say of the ram in the thicket? He too has a story to tell.

'And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And immediately the spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.'

Now again we see a Son. Now again we see that he was commanded by his Father, who is in heaven, to make of Himself a sacrifice. Now again, we see that he does not run from this demand, but in obedience to his Father, accepts it, for it is written that, after he had been in the wilderness forty days, *'Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.'* [And elsewhere *'No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.'*]

It is interesting to note. Unlike in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark does not mention Satan leaving after the forty days in the wilderness. Some may say

this is simply because Mark's Gospel is short, and leaves out many details. I believe this argument is silliness. Mark wishes to inform us that Our Lord's temptation is not finished. It has just begun. It cannot be finished until *'the time is fulfilled.'* Until, like Isaac, he ascends the mountain of sacrifice, Zion, holy Moriah, there to complete what Isaac began; there to fulfill the obedience of the first lawful son of Abraham as the last Son of Abraham under the law.

Lent has begun, and we who have been baptized Sons of God are driven by His Spirit to follow Christ *'into the wilderness.'* We are compelled by the Holy Word of God to ascend the mountain of sacrifice. In these forty days of Lent, Christ takes us into his temptation. Christ takes us into his Passion, that he might make us one with His obedience, one with His divine Sonship.

Isaac must be tested. The Son must be tested. Now, O Christians, who claim the name 'Sons of God', shall you too not also be tested? Last week, I bid you, descend into the valleys to sacrifice yourself for your neighbor, among the people. Now I bid you, ascend unto the mountain, facing every temptation which Our Lord himself faced, fearless, and with the full confidence of God, knowing that *he tempteth no man beyond his power.*

Ascend that mountain in prayer and thanksgiving, following Jesus, being led by the burning love of God, being bound by the cords of faith in God, and carrying the wood of the cross of the Holy One of God.

And there, as you carry the burden of your cross up higher and higher, you shall ask:

'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?'

And He will respond, *'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering: my son.'*

'Do not err, my beloved brethren.' *'Do not be afraid.'* For in this life of temptation, you will be afraid. In this life of temptation, under Our Lord's cross, you will be attacked, terrified; indeed *in your alarm* you will cry out, even as Isaac did, even as Christ did, *'My Father!'*

Then He will comfort you with the words of Abraham:

'Here I am, my Son.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Genesis 22:1-18; James 1:12-18; Mark 1:9-15.