

Scripture:

Psalm 16

Genesis 22:1-19

“He is who He is.”

A poem ---

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

So writes William Cowper.

Fitting for today --- a day when we have what is for many ---- a bit of a troubling passage.

I know Bob touched on it and other passages last week --- and it was faithful and good --- and so today we continue to explore this passage.

This passage that at first is a bit of a troubling passage.

But ---- as the poet said --- God moves in a mysterious way ---- planting footsteps in the sea ---
 ---- His purposes ripen fast
 He is His own interpreter --- and He will make it plain.

And God does make a clear point in this passage --- God before everything that we treasure --- God first.

Imagine ---- a man has waited almost 100 years --- Abraham was in the neighbourhood of 100 years old when Isaac was born.

He had been waiting and waiting and waiting --- losing hope of ever having an heir --- first born son.

And then finally --- God miraculously gives Him a son ---- read Genesis 15 for the beautiful story of God's promise with Abram about having flesh of his flesh --- an heir ---- a son of his own at 100 years old.

And then after waiting almost a 100 years there is this element in the story of sacrificing this long awaited heir.

Human sacrifice --- something that was rife and common in the pagan culture and cults at that time.

Curious that as this small group of wandering tribal desert nomads ---- the Jews ----- this people who God would use to change the history of the world --- would have as one of their very first holy narratives ---- a story about to involve human sacrifice.

That would do nothing to separate them from the surrounding cultures and practices of the day.

And yet this is the story --- the intimacy between Abraham and God ----- this is the story more than any other --- that separated the Jewish understanding of God and Jewish religion from all the others of the day.

Abraham --- the story of God interacting with Abraham separates Yahweh -- - Israel's one and only true God from all other understanding of the Divine.

The importance of this narrative revealing the tender and personal loving nature of God cannot be overstated --- here God is unlike any other conception of God ever before.

Here God is intimate and compassionate --- personal and connected ---- unheard of at that time.

God is just beginning to show just how different --- and powerful --- and caring He truly is.

He gives us a sense here just how He can and will step into His creation in a decisive and influential way --- Christ --- the cross and crucifixion ----- and then of course the resurrection.

This narrative ----- Abraham --- Isaac ---- shows us the very heart of God.

God's intimate connection with His people begins with Abraham.

Along with the creation story before ---- and God's relationship with Moses after ----- the story of God's relationship and self revelation with and through Abraham signifies the self revealing of God as saving love --- freeing from bondage love.

A Divine self giving love ---- that had no precedent in the ancient world --- this kind of relationship between God and humanity was unheard of.

God who is close --- in dialogue with His creatures ----- testing and interacting with them --- reacting to their comings and goings --- symbiotic - ---- deeply connected.

He is who He is ---- and He isn't like anyone or anything else.

God is who God is ----- there is none like Him --- there is no one ----- nor nothing to compare Him to.

This passage of God interacting with Abraham ---- testing Abraham --- revealing things about Himself to Abraham and all the world ----- drives the point home that with God ----- it must always be God first.

God first no matter what.

God before comfort.

God before ease.

God before house and home.

God before job.

God before money.

God before reputation.

God before optics ---- how things appear as opposed to what really matters.

God before what is culturally accepted and agreed upon.

God first.

God before everything --- including family.

Including even first borns --- including even long long --- long awaited first born boys ---- heirs.

It's hard for us to imagine the importance of first borns --- first born sons --- heirs ---- and the importance this played in the minds and realities of earlier societies including the Jewish people.

We don't really have anything to compare this with.

Heirs were like the very life line of the ancient Jewish people.

In a very real sense everything one had ever stood for --- worked for --- and lived for ---- rested in the hands of your first born son.

Wives were replaceable ---- practically interchangeable ---- a male Jew often had numerous wives --- after all 9 months is far too long to wait for another son ----- so you might want numerous wombs at your disposal ---- producing more babies ---- more baby boys.

Daughters were helpful --- household chores --- assisting with the rearing of other children ---- and here we again get back to males --- especially the rearing of other baby boys.

Sons --- especially the first son ----- were of the highest necessity ---- otherwise what one did was practically all done in vain --- quick to disappear after one's own life --- rendering one's own life practically pointless.

So yes it is hard for us to understand the crucial importance of the first born son that pervaded the culture at the time Abraham lived.

But that's all part of the point here ---- God takes what seems to be the absolute most important thing in the world --- and makes it secondary ---- subservient to Himself.

God marched into the minds and hearts of His chosen people ---- and ultimately into the world ----- and basically said ---- "All that you hold as sacred and true and necessary and absolute ----- is secondary now."

"Sons --- first born sons --- heirs ---- are secondary --- I am primary."

"I am who I am ---- and I am primary in every way."

"And so to drive this point home Abraham --- you the one I have first chosen to reveal myself to ---- must kill off what is of utmost importance to you ---- to remind you ----- and to show to all the world that in me is a new way --- a new understanding --- a whole new world order."

"So take your son ---- take what is most precious to you ---- and your people ---- and kill it --- do away with it --- as a way of reminding yourself that I am of utmost importance and nothing will compete with me."

“Do as I ask even in matters such as these --- first borns --- heirs --- cultural life lines.”

That’s the radical new reality of listening to and following God ---- making everything else ---- including your family --- including your wife --- including your children --- including your first born --- long awaited son --- your legacy and life line ---- second fiddle.

This kind of intimate --- unconditional ----- personal ----- covenantal relationship ----- had never been heard of before --- between a man and a god --- God.

This God of the Jews ---- God because there is only God----- God was --- and is ---- something completely different.

He’s off on His own ----- he’s in His own category ----- unlike anything else ever heard of ----- thought of ----- or experienced.

He is who He is.

There is none like Him.

Everything is suddenly different now with God and Abraham and Isaac --- and of course the truly radical nature of God finds its culmination in Jesus Christ ---- especially Christ on the cross.

Thomas Cahill has a brilliant 7 volume series of Books --- the Hinges of History --- only 1-6 are written so far ----- you may have heard of the first one it was called --- “How the Irish Saved Civilization”.

In his hinges of history series there is one book called --- “The Gift of the Jews.” ----- “The Gift of the Jews” ----- and the subtitle is ----- “How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the way everyone Thinks and Feels.”

“How a Tribe of Desert Nomads --- the Jews ---- Changed the way everyone Thinks and Feels.” --- fascinating look at Judaism --- and the Old Testament.

And in the book Cahill argues that the God of the Jews ---- God ---- was --- is ----- something radically new and different never before seen in any culture or society's understanding or expression.

And of course as Christians we know this --- and we know this chiefly because of Jesus Christ.

But Cahill does a great job of reminding us that God is like no one nor nothing else in all of creation.

And as he shows the radical and new nature of God he ask questions like ---- "How can we open ourselves to the God who cannot be understood?"

He reminds us that God is beyond our amulets.

Amulets are ---- the little good luck charm trinket kind of things we treasure --- stuff we put trust and faith in.

So God is much more than just a good luck charm or material possession we can have faith or trust in --- things like money and so on.

God is curious ---- He sometimes rains on picnics ---- He allows human beings to sometimes be inhuman --- He even sentences us all to death.

And it's true God has sentenced us all to death ----- not die --- as in die forever ----- but we are all sentenced to death --- to a moment of death ---- after which comes life eternal ----- but we do have that moment of death first.

We are all subject to death --- it's just that as people of faith we know that death isn't the final statement.

So how is it that we open ourselves up to this God?

God who allows humans to be inhuman ---- witness Charlottesville, Virginia ----- and Barcelona ----- as examples of how God sometimes allows humans to do inhuman things.

So how is that we can open ourselves up to a God who allows humans to do inhuman things --- a God who sentences us all to death ---- a God who isn't

limited to our schemings and good luck charms or material buffer zones that we create for ourselves.

How is it that God gives and takes beyond our understanding --- and beyond what we can ever make sense of?

How can we give over to a God whose ways are beyond us --- not interpretable --- not foreseeable ---- not controllable ---- mysterious --- beyond grasp and explanation?

What kind of God is that is always the initiator?

Remember God goes to Abraham ----- God goes to Moses --- the burning bush --- and it is God who goes to Adam and Eve in the garden ---- finding them.

And of course Jesus says --- “You did not choose me --- but I chose you.” --- see John 15 verse 16.

God is always the initiator --- He is who He is.

What kind of God says to his very first follower --- in a way the very first person He chose to truly reveal himself to --- take your son ----- you know the one I promised you would finally have at 100 years old after you had waited and waited and waited --- take this son --- and kill Him as a sign of your love and devotion --- and fear of me?

There had not been --- there would not --- be there will not be --- there isn't anyone or anything quite like God ----- He who revealed Himself to Abraham.

This isn't just another religious story ----- Abraham and God interacting together --- this is as life giving and changing as what God has in store with Jesus Christ.

Abraham's faith is grater than His fear.

Abraham's trust is greater than his doubt and his intellectual desire to want to know why.

God is greater and good --- and loving and trustworthy ---- and Abraham knows that this is enough --- and he is the first person to have a profound and deep trust in God.

God first --- everything else second ---- including family --- including son --- - including first born son --- including when first born son meant everything ---- somehow Abraham gets this and acts on it.

He is who He is --- and Abraham is all in.

Too often we domesticate --- water down --- sentimentalize --- compartmentalize God --- diminishing Him in the process.

Seeing Him as so much smaller than He really is.

Abraham somehow knew that God was huge ---- huger even than what seemed to matter most ---- an heir --- a first born son ---- even after waiting until he was 100 years old to get that first born son.

Right from the get go in the Biblical witness --- we see that God is something other than expected.

He is who He is.

And He is beyond us.

He is for us --- He loves us --- He will do anything for us --- He has already done everything for us ---- Christ and the Nativity ----- and supremely Christ on the cross ---- but He is still always and forever beyond us just a little bit.

God's unending unmerited love for us ----- is too grand and too all encompassing for any one human heart or head to fully grasp ---- and it is a beautiful thing.

Abraham ---- Abraham and Isaac ---- Genesis 22 ---- is a very early example of this great God of ours ---- and how He does things infinitely different.

It's all too easy to water down --- domesticate --- sentimentalize and weaken the power and wonder and grandeur of God.

There was no watering down --- domesticating --- or sentimentalizing the great relief and power and love that Abraham must have felt when God provided the ram for the sacrifice --- instead of Isaac his son.

The unwavering response of Abraham is a beautiful thing to see and witness and think about.

And Abraham's response is not born out of who Abraham is ---- this isn't a story about Abraham ----- it's a story about God --- and what God is doing through Abraham.

It's a story about who God is --- and how God works ---- and lives and moves in and through His people --- us.

He is who He is.

And He is wonderful --- and beautiful --- and radiant --- and loving and gracious and all powerful --- and beyond all description ---- and Abraham got all of this.

As the poet said -----

“God moves in a mysterious way
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

trust Him for His grace;

The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

God is His own interpreter.”

As God said of Himself --- “I am who I am.”

And as God also said -----

“Take your son, your only son, whom you love --- Isaac --- and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”

And as God also said ----

“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” ---- “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Clearly ----- He is who He is --- as does as He sees fit.

God is so grand ---- and so beautiful --- and so --- alive and so true ----- it ought to just blow our minds ----- and fill our hearts with love and compassion and so much more.

The world doesn't need us to water God down ---- it does that just fine on its own.

God is grand and beautiful and huge and wonderful.

We are enveloped by His great and saving love.

Hopefully we have an enthusiasm and commitment to Him that somehow approximates that of Abraham.

Our God is spectacular and larger than life ----- and deserves our very best.

He is who He is.

And He is awesome and loving and all encompassing.

And we are His.

What great truth --- what great comfort.

Amen.