

My son Andrew and I headed up the mountain together, or at least the hill, in Castine, Maine many times. With Phillip safely tucked in for his afternoon nap, and his grandparents watching over him, Andrew and I would make our daily trek toward Dyce's Head Lighthouse, where we would rediscover the path leading to the boulders, where we could sit and read the afternoon away. We listened to the waves crashing on the shore, while breathing in the fresh, clear air seemingly unique to Maine, and we could allow our imaginations to go wild as we read the *Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis, an Anglican theologian. The story was drenched in allegory, as anyone who has read these books soon understands. There is something different about one of the main characters, the lion named Aslan, when you learn that he represents the only force that can counter the evil of the White Witch. In the second book of the series, *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Susan, as she was preparing meet Aslan, hears Mr. Beaver say, "Aslan is a lion, THE LION, the great Lion." "Ooh," says Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe?" Mr. Beaver replied, "Safe, who said anything about safe? Of course, he isn't safe. But he's GOOD. He's the King, I tell you."

As we hear in our story today about YHWH (the Israelite name for God), Abraham and Isaac, in the event most often referred to as the Binding of Isaac, the force of God, the only force that can counter evil in the world, who is King over all, is not always safe. This text draws us into the somewhat uncomfortable reality that God is powerful and unpredictable and willing to go to dangerous heights to call from us the best of who we are. This can be excruciatingly difficult work and the dangerous and powerful God is quite serious about eradicating evil, or separation, or that which is not of God, in our world. This heart-wrenching story appears early in book of Genesis, which begins the story of the continual unfolding of creation and the subsequent rupture of the relationship between God and humankind. We've heard about our utter obedience to God, our complete allegiance to the force of goodness in our world and to nothing else, and our willingness to give back to God what God has given to us. We know that what is often most precious to us is essential to our understanding and practice of our faith. We might take away the truth that our salvation or the redemption of humankind comes at a cost, that there are costs and blessings to being in a right and righteous relationship with God—costs for us and costs for God, as of course, this story can foreshadow the death of God's son, God's only son, the one whom God loved – on the cross.

There are a few truths in this story that I would like to touch on and invite us to explore.

As I understand from my reading, this story of the binding of Isaac is a central story in Jewish theology, and is incorporated into their daily liturgy. I don't know the specifics of how that works, and I'd love to know more, but my instinct is that it has to do with blessings that are so integral to their faith expression. I can imagine the story may be told by the Jewish people as a reminder to God of the obedience of Abraham, just as they may tell the story of the exodus, as a reminder to themselves of God's obedience and offer of salvation to God's people who had been held captive by Pharaoh.

I've been thinking quite a lot about how our liturgy holds this rather wild and dangerous God who asks for "ourselves, our souls and bodies", (as we proclaim and offer in our Eucharistic prayer). I also think about that holy interchange, the silent and pregnant and precious moment when we stretch out our hands to receive the body of Christ, and when we let go of all which is not of God within our souls. So that we may be filled with the grace of God, so that we can join with God in eradicating evil in the world by bringing and being love to others, and to become what we are about to receive – the presence of the Risen Christ. I wonder where else in the service your heart feels invited to offer to God what is precious in your life – not so that it may be taken away from you, but so that it may be

blessed, and that we may be blessed by our deeper commitment to the God who wants us all, wants all of us, so that the fullness of our being may be blessed.

I'm also wondering about Abraham's silence as God asks him to take his son, his only son, the one he loves, and offer him as a burnt sacrifice. This is the same Abraham who argued vehemently for the safety of the people of Gomorrah and who pleaded and railed against Hagar's being sent out into the desert with Ishmael to die. Abraham wasn't unaccustomed to honest and hard conversation with God, so why is he silent this time? In the midst of our own questioning of God's motives or directive in this story, in the tumult of our own hearts, as we yearn for an explanation or call out for some escape clause, Abraham appears resolute, unwaveringly direct in his choice and use of words, and plodding up the hill, with what appears to us to be determination and resignation. Now I think I recognize that silence. It's the same absence of words one finds in a hospice room, where loved ones are gathered anticipating death; it is also that holy pause I hear and attend to as people prepare to exchange their wedding vows; it is the space between words which seems to invite the awareness of the presence of God. Sometimes the silence can be a recognition that we are suddenly on very holy ground. When we have something really hard to do, we often need to go deep within our bones, into our souls, to "be still and know that God is God". Thomas Keating, a modern contemplative monk, speaks of "Silence as God's first language". That's what I was imagining was happening on that walk up the mountain. God and Abraham were having a conversation, perhaps the most important one ever, but it was one that words would only muddle, one which needed the deepest of all connections. For if the silence was indeed the sharing of the hearts of God and Abraham, perhaps it was this mutual and shared space of connection and vulnerability that allowed Abraham to see the ram, the sacrifice, offered by God. If he had been busy talking, or moving about aimlessly, perhaps he would have missed what God most wanted to offer him, a way to honor Abraham's offer, and to bless it, not take it away from him, but give it back to him a hundred-fold. This silence allows us to grow in faith and love, and as God's children.

Now there is this thing called unholy silence, that we've been exploring in our Praying the Psalms course. That silence is where we don't name or acknowledge when we've erred, or when we've missed the mark, or have injured others with our words or actions, or when there has been someone in need and we failed to act. This silence, which fails to acknowledge the truth of our lives, can harm our relationship with God and with others. We can feel distant, separated, outcast from – and those are all words which can be used to describe evil.

The unholy silence that can reside in our hearts or in the heart of the world is the evil which needs to be eradicated. This is what God chases after and asks us to offer forward, so God can take it away. If we name it, (that hurt, that pain, that behavior that draws us away from the fullness of God), God will heal it. This is when we want that dangerous, wild, and unpredictable God to sweep into our lives, and says "no more". But in order for this to happen, we need to put God's love in the center of our lives, so God can dismantle anything that is not of God. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, "If it's not about love, then it's not about God." It's time in our world to get rid of anything that is not about love. This is a time when we especially need that fierce God with whom we can work to eradicate evil from our lives.

Our gospel story today speaks of compassionate welcome, of what is required of us to receive Christ from someone else, even when that presentation of Christ comes in ways unfamiliar to us, or in starting ways that may feel unsafe to us. To receive Christ, we need to do what Abraham did, commit ourselves fully to God, be open and vulnerable, engage with deep listening, and stand in solidarity with

those who are in need. We are invited to bind our hearts ever more deeply, so that just like when Aslan defeated the White Witch and returned Narnia to a place and time of goodness, mercy, and love, when the ice melted and the rivers began to flow again, as they have with our own baptism, the flow of divine love from God, our Creator, through Jesus, our Savior, and through the Holy Spirit who draws us always closer to the reality of God, we can work with God to do the same here and now. Amen.