

Palm Sunday: March 19/20, 2016

Commitment



Palm Sunday and its triumphal nature, juxtaposed with the solemnity of Good Friday, have always given me pause. How can the passion narrative of Jesus be both victory and defeat at one and the same time? Yes, we know the narrative well enough. We know “the Word became flesh”; we know John’s shout out, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”; we know Jesus’ confidences with the disciples that “he must go up to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and on the third day be raised to life.” These we well know and anticipate in the coming week. After all, was it not a *fait accompli* when God pronounced his serpent crushing prophesy in the Garden in the beginning? Not so fast. Do we know how trust flows throughout the narrative? Do we appreciate the role that faith plays? *Teach us, Lord Jesus, what it means to commit our lives into the hands of God, your Father and our Father.*

The testing of Abraham related in the Old Testament reading gives us a glimpse into the passion narrative before us this week. There are unmistakable parallels.



“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household, and go to the land I will show you.” So Abram left.
—Gen. 12:1,4

“*Leave your country, your people and your father’s household, and go to the land I will show you.*” We don’t know Abram’s reaction to this encounter with God nor the deliberation he went through with Sarai and his household. It had to be considerable. You can imagine what it might be like. If you’ve ever unrooted loved ones for employment or family reasons you’ve experienced the upset. It had to be no different for Abram. Yet all that the Scripture records is: “*So Abram left.*” Regardless of the deliberation surrounding God’s command, the fact that Abram obeyed signaled that he had been called into relationship with God. You do not follow someone you hold in disdain. And to leave house and home, kith and kin, without coercion: This one will do only for someone held in the highest regard. “God said go,” and “Abram left.”



The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. —John 1:9,14

Our Holy Week narrative begins here. God said to his Son “go” and Jesus left. House and home, kith and kin, the glory of heaven and the adulation of angels. He left it all. And did so willingly. His relationship with his Father knew no bounds. It was never a question of “if,” but only “when.” And the time had come. *The true light that gives*

light to every man was coming into the world. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Relationships such as this, relationships that run deep and call forth the highest and the best: These are not casual. They are intentional and they are deliberate. Why did Abram leave? The answer is as simple as it is profound:



Abram believed the Lord, and [the Lord] credited to him as righteousness.” By faith Abraham obeyed and went even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in a foreign country though he was promised an inheritance . By faith he lived in tents though he was promised a kingdom. If our passion narrative begins with a call, it is inspired by faith.



Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and men. Hands that formed the universe became calloused with saw and plane. Head that wore the crown of heaven wore the sweat of the workshop. And arms that commanded legions of angels willingly submitted the authority of parents and authorities. Never a second thought about his course or his destiny. Absolute was his faith in his Father and in the mission given to him.

Abraham loved Isaac, the son of the promise, more than life. God the Father loved Jesus, the Son of promise, who was *the* life. Such is the outcome of faith. It reveals love. And to know love is to know God.

“Take your son, your only son, [the son] whom you love.” –Gen. 22:2

“This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” –Matt. 17:5

How deeply does love run? So deep was Abraham’s love for Isaac that God described it threefold. First he said, *Take your son*. Isaac was not just any son. He was the son of Abraham’s old age, given when he was 100. The son of promise, a promise that took 25 years to fulfill. The son through whom he would receive offspring as numerous as the stars. God continues, *Take your only son*. His only son by Sarah. His “one and only.” Isaac was plan “A” and there was no plan “B.” And then to plumb the depth of Abraham’s love, God finally says *Take your son whom you love*. I have two sons by birth. I love them more than life. I know this love that Abraham had for Isaac. It runs deep and it would sacrifice all. Our human

experience, though imperfect, gives us a glimpse into the love of another Father. *This is my son, whom I love*, says the voice from the cloud of Transfiguration. *With him I am well pleased*. Two sons. Isaac and Jesus. Both beloved. Both with converging destinies.

"Go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering." -Gen. 22:2

"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, [yet] he did not open his mouth." -Isaiah 53:7

William Barclay, the noted Scottish theologian, wrote: "Love always involves responsibility, and love always involves sacrifice." A couple is blessed with the news of a child, and they begin the task of reordering their entire lives. A mother puts her life on the line to bring the child into this world. No sooner does child arrive than sleepless nights begin. And though they don't realize it at the time, they will learn "once a parent, always a parent." Responsibility and sacrifice. You can almost see it coming. Jesus says to Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter says, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." In so many words God says to Abraham, "Do you love me?" And Abraham says, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." *Then take your son, your only son, the son whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice him there as a burnt offering*. It is a powerful scene. Again we are not privileged to know Abraham's turmoil over such a request. We simply know "Early the next morning Abraham set out for the place God had told him about." "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Abraham's obedience of faith is remarkable. But it is not the lesson for us, since each person must answer for him or herself the question by God, "Do you love me?" Rather, the lesson comes from the example of Isaac. "When they reached the place, Abraham built an altar, bound Isaac and laid him on the wood, and took the knife to slay his son." In Isaac we see exactly what is to transpire for Jesus in this coming Holy Week. "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, [yet] he did not open his mouth." Love always involves sacrifice. When love is suspended on the wood of the cross, see what love looks like in flesh and blood.



God's commitment to us is without comparison. He does not ask of us that which we cannot do. We cannot atone for our sin any more than we can cease from sinning. So he graciously intercedes in Isaac's behalf. "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." God always provides a way of escape, so that we may be able to endure. Even in your darkest moments, when the knife is raised over your dreams and no recourse is in sight, God is there to rescue and restore. He treats our faith in him as something precious, just as a father treats the love of his child. He will never disappoint and he will always provide.



But for Jesus there was no way of escape. Not for lack of love by his Father. *This is my son, whom I love.* No, the cross before Jesus this week results from a greater good that God the Father would work, a commitment to us borne of deep compassion. A world hung in the balance. A world he loved. A world he would redeem with a sacrifice only he could make. How great the love of God, that he would withhold not even his only begotten Son for us and for our salvation. He willingly offered, and Jesus willingly went. Up to Jerusalem to the adulation of the people this Palm Sunday. Into Gethsemane and before Pilate. Along the way of sorrows and raised upon a cross. In his final journey, as he relinquishes his life, he commits his spirit into his Father's hands. Jesus never doubts the love of his Father, even in his death. Know this. His faith in God has become your faith. His death has become your death. His confidence has become your confidence. And the same Father who tenderly received Jesus' spirit is the Father who receives your spirit when you commit it into his hands. It is his commitment to you. A commitment signed in blood and sealed with an empty tomb. God bless your journey up to Jerusalem this week. Behold the commitment of God in Jesus for you. Amen.