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The Second Sunday of Lent (B)

Today, in the reading from the book of Genesis, we see a foreshadowing of the Messiah in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac. The Lord called Abraham while he was still in the land of the Chaldeans and said to him: "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you" (Genesis 12:1-2).

There was nothing particular about Abraham that gave the Lord a specific reason to call him. He had previously never known the Lord nor had Abraham performed any especially significant deeds. The Lord chose Abraham simply because he wanted to; the Lord chose Abraham simply because he loved him, and so he chooses us as well.

After Abraham followed the way of the Lord to the land of Canaan, the Lord clarified his promise to him that he would make of him a great nation:

Look about you, and from where you are, gaze to the north and south, east and west; all the land that you see I will give to you and your descendants forever. I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth; if anyone could count the dust of the earth, your descendants too might be counted. Set forth and walk about in the land, through its length and breadth, for to you I will give it (Genesis 13:14-17).

Here, then, we come to the particular dilemma Abraham faced when God said to him, "Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust [as a burnt offering] on a height that I will show you" (Genesis 22:2). The difficulty here for Abraham is not so much in the offering of his son as it is in the Lord's former promise to him. This is not to say that Abraham did not love Isaac - he certainly did - but this command of the Lord seems to contradict his promise to make of him a great nation.

When Abraham's wife Sarah gave birth to her son she called him "Isaac" - a name that means "laughter" - because, as she said, "God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6). When Isaac was born Abraham was one hundred years old, and Sarah was close to this age. The Lord then told Abraham that "it is through Isaac that descendants shall bear your name" (Genesis 21:12). All of God's promises to Abraham rested upon his only son and now the Lord asked Abraham to give him Isaac. Without Isaac, how could the promise possibly be fulfilled? Nevertheless, Abraham followed the command of the Lord.

When they reached the top of the height, Isaac - thinking they had gone to offer a sheep - looked around and asked his father, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust?" (Genesis 22:7). The father answered his

son, "God himself will provide the sheep;" surely there were tears in his eyes as his heart pounded within his chest (Genesis 22:8).

When all was ready and Abraham was about to sacrifice his only son, the angel of the Lord commanded him, "Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son" (Genesis 22:12).

Now we come before the Lord fully aware of our sins and with the full knowledge that the "wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). What are we to do? We, too, look around and ask, "where is the sheep for the holocaust?" We are told, "God himself will provide the sheep," and the John the Baptist announces to us, "Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

God indeed provided the lamb to atone for our sins; he sent his only Son whom he loved. "He ... did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all" (Romans 8:32) because "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). At the time of the Passover, the Lord commanded the descendants of Abraham, "Go and procure lambs for your families, and slaughter them as Passover victims" (Exodus 12:21). "The lamb must be a year-old male and without blemish" (Exodus 12:5).

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be . . . he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls . . . can sanctify those who are defiled . . . how much more will the blood of Christ? (Hebrews 9:11-14).

Jesus Christ, "like a lamb was led to the slaughter or a sheep to the shearers, he was silent and opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). "But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins, upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Of Jesus' death on the Cross, the Father has said, "Through his suffering my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear" (Isaiah 53:11b). "He shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses" (Isaiah 53:12c).

Through his death Jesus has taken away our sins and redeemed us, restoring our relationship with the Father and giving us the promise of eternal life and glory with him. This is certainly cause for great rejoicing in "this joyful season when we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed" (Preface, Lent I). The Church presents to us today the reading from Genesis to remind us of the very reason for this penitential season. Through these forty days of Lent we are to renew our love and trust in the Lord who has saved us.

At the same, Holy Mother Church presents us with the reading from the Gospel of Matthew concerning the

Transfiguration of the Lord to remind us of the joys of Easter which we will experience after these forty days. In her wisdom, the Church recognizes that the beginning of any sort of discipline is difficult. Ask someone who has quit smoking, or drinking, or gambling, or who has lost a significant amount of weight. The first week or so are always very difficult, but once that hurdle is cleared it becomes at least a bit easier.

So it is with Lent. I do not know about you, but a double bacon cheeseburger never sounded so delectable as it did on Friday. The Lenten disciplines are difficult if we truly seek to honor them. As we continue our Lenten observance may we always remember the Father's offering of his only Son for the forgiveness of our sins. At the same time, let us keep in mind the great joys of the Resurrection that await us if we remain faithful when the Lord at last comes again.