

Homily
February 25, 2024
Second Sunday of Lent
24:06 – 36:41

How many of you here enjoy taking a test? You do?! We need to talk. (laughter)

We've all been tested. (To those in the sanctuary) Right, Nate? Right, Andrew? Oh, yeah – Kate, yes.

Now we tend to think that testing has to do with just a measure of our knowledge, or lack there of. But “testing,” well there's a lot more to it. Such as to assess the quality of a product, checking its limitations and its strengths. Or to check character under stress. Or loyalty. Or to provide data for making a choice, as in the NFL scouting combine. Down there (gesturing toward downtown) the Cathedral of Indianapolis, Lucas Oil Stadium. (laughter)

Or we try something new, testing our skill. Or we assess a candidate's level of development for inclusion in a specialized role, such as Navy Seals or Army Rangers. We are all tested constantly.

God chose to put Abraham to the test, we heard in the First Reading. And our First Reading is actually a shortened version of the entire story, which is a wonderful story. Our reading left out the part of the journey with Isaac carrying the wood and Isaac having a conversation with dad. And dad saying not to worry, that God would provide.

What we heard is not only a powerful story, but disturbing. To sacrifice one's own son.

But for Abraham there had been many struggles prior to this testing. From Chapter 12 to Chapter 25 of the Book of Genesis, the entirety of the life of Abraham unfolds.

His first test: to migrate, to become an immigrant in a foreign land. Then there's the challenge of living in Egypt, where he was afraid that because his wife was beautiful, that somebody in Egypt would try to kill him. So he decided to say, "She's my sister." And when Pharaoh found out about that, he wasn't pleased. – Abraham had lied for his own safety.

Then Lot, his kinsman - they part ways. Abraham loses his closest friend. And very soon after, he rescued Lot from captivity.

He begs God again and again for an heir to fulfill the promise that God had made. And he spent time in the presence of the Divine, when the three men came to be with him, to eat at his table -- an overwhelming experience.

Then there's the birth of Ishmael by Hagar, his servant, which set off strife in the tents between Sarai and Hagar.

And then there's the Covenant of circumcision that he enters. God's power changes his name and now the Lord is bound to him, and he to the Lord.

Finally, there is the promise of a child and the interceding for Sodom, where he risks his very life, pleading for just a just few in Sodom.

And then of course there's more family strife, the Covenant with Abimelech over a contested well. And then finally, a son is born. Amen.

Six times in this journey of struggles, God makes promises to Abraham. He promises he'll be the father of many peoples, many nations; that God will safeguard him and that he will have an heir. And then we come to today's reading.

God puts Abraham to the test. Hasn't he been tested enough?

This is part of the inscrutability of God. We don't completely understand. But God is also gracious. As we see. This is the ultimate test, the greatest of trials. And it's widely recognized as a literary masterpiece, depicting just a few lines spoken by God, who is the absolute Lord, inscrutable, and yet ultimately kind and gracious.

Abraham acts, well – faithfully. He shows his trust in this God with whom he has Covenant. And at the end of the test, there is the seventh promise of blessings to Abraham. Unlike the other statements, which were merely promissory, this one is presented as a reward for Abraham's extraordinary trust.

Such struggles. Again and again, Abraham stands in the presence of God, questions God, listens to God, doesn't understand, but remains faithful. A powerful example. This is why he's known as the Father of Faith.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" So we heard in the Second Reading. We have a shortened version of the reading. It ends with God's promise through Christ to intercede for us.

But then it goes on in a part that was left out. (I don't know why. I didn't draw up the Lectionary. I would have left it in.) What was left out? That *"I believe,"* Paul says, *"that neither death nor life nor principality, nor present things, nor future things, nor any creature or any struggle can keep us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord."* Nothing!

How many here have struggles in life?

(To the altar servers -) Do you have any struggles? You do. Andrew? Yeah. You've just had fewer than some of these people out here. They're older.

I want you all to hold onto those struggles. Think of two or three struggles you have faced in your life. Do you have them?

We are in Covenant with God, in and through Christ Jesus. The all-conquering power of God's love has overcome every obstacle to salvation. And has overcome, as Paul says, every threat to separate us from the love of God. This power is manifested fully in God's own son being delivered up to death and then resurrection for our salvation. And through him, we can overcome all our afflictions, our trials, our struggles.

But have you ever noticed, sometimes in the moment of the struggle, we don't sense God's presence, do we? We tend to think he's not there, he has forgotten me. Where the heck is God? Does that ring true? Oh, yeah.

But did you also notice that in reflecting back upon that moment, later we realize that God was faithfully present. And we move through the struggle.

The only difference between us and Abraham is that there is nothing that I know of where God says, "Let's put John to the test." That's already been done in Christ Jesus. And we have the benefit of that Christ who will always be with us.

So recount your struggles. Where was Christ in its midst, or in their midst? Did you notice it? Or did it become more clear later? Do you grasp the promise of safety and future in Christ, as Abraham did in the God who migrated him and walked with him through everything?

Brothers and sisters, last week I mentioned that every time we celebrate Eucharist, we celebrate in the midst of the Sign of the Covenant we have with God in Christ Jesus. And that Covenant, that Sign we have in Eucharist, underpins what we have heard. May we continue to find that to be true when we gather. And then may we carry the gift with us into the struggles and trials of our lives.