

Ordinary Time 13

Sunday between June 26
and July 2 inclusive

No unifying perspective characterizes these four lections, although each deals in some sense with the perennial and difficult issue of human identity in relationship to God. The passage from Gen. 22 is one of the most challenging in all scripture. Not only does the urging of God call on Abraham to do the unthinkable—offer his only son on the altar of sacrifice—but it places in greatest jeopardy the long-delayed, but now realized, promise. Yet in the end it is Abraham's faith and God's grace that prevail. God does provide! It is to Abraham's credit that he perceives that reality, so that Isaac lives. And the promise lives, as well.

Psalm 13 is a classic lament, the prayer of one who is deeply troubled over some crisis. The anxiety that churns in the psalmist's soul results in expressions toward God that are confrontational and hostile. God has neglected the psalmist, with the result that he or she is in intense pain. The urgent imperatives that burst from the psalmist's lips—"consider . . . answer . . . give light"—are an appeal for release from that pain, and at the same time are intended to offer relief from the distress of alienation from fellow human beings. In the end, there is a distinct shift in mood, in that God has responded to the cries of distress, and the prayer-er is thus transformed.

In the passage from Rom. 6, Paul juxtaposes three pairs of opposites: sin versus righteousness, freedom versus slavery, and wages versus gifts. The seriousness with which Paul takes sin quickly leads the reader away from the view that sin is simply that which one does or fails to do. For Paul, sin is a power that exceeds the abilities of human beings to contest with their own strength. Only God is a match for the power of sin, which means that freedom from sin is the result of liberation by God. It also means that one does not earn or achieve eternal life, for that is a free gift bestowed only by God.

As for the Gospel lesson from Matt. 10, to say that "whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the

one who sent me" is to make a powerful claim about the identification of believers with Jesus and, in turn, with God. While that profound connection between disciples and Jesus implies the ultimate vindication of disciples (see the reward language in Matt. 10:41-42), the immediate result of that connection will be disruption of the world, even of its most precious family relationships. Identity as "child of God" preempts even identity within the family.

Genesis 22:1-14

This narrative is among the most odd and most compelling in the Bible. Much of its oddness and power comes from its strategic location in the larger Abraham-Sarah story. At the beginning of that story (Gen. 12:7), God had assured Abraham there would be descendants for his family, so that the promise would persist. For a very long time, however, there had been no child given by God to the aging couple. The narrative makes us wait until the last moment for the birth. Finally, in 21:1-7, the son is given, in very old age. Sarah laughs the laugh of the blessed (21:6). The promise is kept. God is faithful. The future is open.

Only kept, faithful and open, however, until the next chapter! In our narrative that follows close upon the birth, Abraham is again sent into crisis, over the same issue. The theme is testing (22:1). God will discern whether Abraham trusts and obeys the Giver, or whether Abraham only cherishes and covets the gift. Abraham's question in this narrative is the same as Job's question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). Or does Job (Abraham) fear God for a reward?

1. In the first scene (vs. 1-5), Abraham is addressed by the abrupt voice of God, *a voice of savage sovereignty* (v. 1). The voice utters only the name, "Abraham!" (v. 1). Abraham, with his identity now at risk, answers readily and firmly, "Here I am." Without any trimmings, Abraham receives an awesome, unthinkable demand: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love" (v. 2). Take the gift, the one you have hoped for so long, the sign of your faith, the only source of your laughter, and surrender him. The episode begins only because the God of Abraham is a God of such authority who dares require of Abraham whatever God wills.

As soon as the voice finishes, Abraham acts in obedience (vs. 3-5). He acts promptly and readily, as promptly and readily as he had first responded (12:4). He is to "worship" (22:5). He tells his servant, "We [the boy and I] will come back to you." Does he believe in a miracle?

Is he lying to his servant? Does he deceive himself? Does he recognize he will return alone if he fully obeys the voice? None of our questions is answered.

2. In the second scene (vs. 6–8), the plot reaches close to its center. Abraham is about to obey. He is addressed by a second voice. Isaac, his cherished, long-awaited son, speaks, *a voice of innocent pathos*. Isaac addresses his father in bewilderment. The father answers his son the same way he answered his God: "Here I am . . ." (v. 7); he adds: "my son." The father discerns the pathos in the conversation. The boy asks the obvious question, not comprehending that he himself is the proposed and intended answer. He is the intended lamb of slaughter. The father answers quickly (v. 8). His is the measured answer, telling us everything, except what we most want to know. Is the answer a loving deception of the boy? Is it a direct lie by the father? Is it a brute reference to bloody obedience? Is it an act of outrageous hope? We have no clue, but the pathos of the father and the son is now heavy in the narrative.

3. In the third scene (vs. 9–14), Abraham's obedient offering is about to be made. The blade lingers in the air, against his son, his only son, whom he loves. Just then, at the last moment, Abraham is addressed one more time. This address is urgent, as though the speaker may have waited an instant too long before making an intervention. This is a second voice from God, a different voice, now cast as an angel. This is *a voice of stunning generosity*. Again Abraham answers. He answers the angel's generosity the way he answers God's sovereignty and Isaac's innocence: "Here I am" (v. 11).

The angel grants a reprieve to the son, who will live. Indeed, the angel grants a reprieve to the father, who need not obey. Now God knows (v. 12)! God knows that Abraham not only covets the gift of the son, Abraham trusts God the giver. Abraham does indeed fear God for naught—not for reward, but because he is formed for faith. Abraham's enigmatic response to Isaac in v. 8 turned out to be true, more than Abraham knew. God does indeed provide. Abraham's faith is decisive; what Abraham's faith wrought gives a name to the place of the generous miracle (v. 14). The name of the place is not a tribute to the faith of Abraham, however. Rather the name remembers and mediates God's generosity. God continues to provide!

The narrative skillfully links his poignant crisis to the larger story of faith. Everything for the larger story hinges on this moment. In this moment, Abraham must answer all the voices that put him at risk. Faith comes in such small, frightened moments. Abraham's response permits the journey of faith begun in Gen. 12 to continue.

Psalm 13

This psalm divides into three distinct parts, and is the classic example of a psalm of complaint. As is characteristic of this genre, this psalm shows that a prayer of complaint is a vigorous, active form of hope in God. Thus the psalm moves from a situation of need to a resolution in joy and confidence. It is the tracing of this movement that is most important to the psalm.

At the outset, the speaker voices a complaint in four questions (vs. 1–2). The opening "How long?" indicates insistence and impatience, and here, as often, contains a scolding accusation against God. These lines assert not only that the speaker is desperate, but that in fact God is responsible for that desperate situation. It is God who has forgotten the petitioner, the same God who swore to remember and pay attention. It is God, the one to whom Israel prays that God may "make his face to shine upon us," who has hidden God's life-giving face. The root of trouble is God's absence and God's indifference, because life requires the presence of God in order to have joy and well-being.

The result of God's neglect is that the speaker experiences pain and sorrow (vs. 2ab). Notice that the pain and sorrow are not specified, so that the poem is available and useful for folk in many different circumstances. The last line of v. 2 perhaps provides a clue to the trouble. The enemy of the speaker has gained the upper hand and prevails. Thus it may be that the trouble is one of humiliation and shame for believing in and betting on a god who is absent and has abandoned the one who trusts. The power of such abandonment is enormous in a "shame"-based community.

On the basis of the complaint that portrays for God a circumstance of profound needfulness, the speaker now utters to God a threefold imperative of petition (vs. 3ab). The verbs are "consider . . . answer . . . give light." The first two imperatives summon God to pay attention and to take the situation seriously. The third petition asks for the gift of life, for "light in the eyes" indicates vitality which for this speaker is almost exhausted. Thus the prayer is from one who feels close to death, and who asks the Giver of life to intervene, in order to restore the fullness of life. Notice, incidentally, that such an intervention by God would not only restore vitality, but would also vindicate the speaker before all mockers.

As we have seen in other psalms, here the petition is characteristically followed by "motivations" (vs. 3c–4). The speaker gives three reasons why God should intervene: (a) If there is no intervention, the speaker will die, and the life of the speaker is presumably precious

to God. (b) If there is no intervention from God, the enemy will gloat, thus shaming not only the speaker, but also the God of the speaker. (c) If there is no intervention, the foe will rejoice. It is clear that the speaker wants to establish for God that God has an important stake in this problem and its resolution. For if the enemy and the foe gloat and rejoice, it is because the enemy prevails not only over the human speaker, but also over the speaker's God. The enemy will conclude that God is weak and irrelevant (cf. Num. 14:16), and so God will be shamed. Therefore God must act to save in order to make manifest God's own sovereign power (cf. Ezek. 36:22, 32).

When we come to vs. 5–6, the mood of the psalm is entirely different. It is as though God has intervened and rescued the speaker. On the basis of the radically changed tone, we are justified in concluding that the prayer has indeed been answered. The God who forgot has remembered. The God who "hid" has now shone. God is vindicated, and the speaker has prevailed over gloaters.

The concluding affirmation is a threefold, first-person acknowledgment of God's decisive intervention. Thus "I/my heart/I" affirm God's "steadfast love/salvation," which has "dealt bountifully." It is important that the last verb is one of "completed action." It has been done! The rescue is completed, even as the speaker utters the word. The prayer is answered. Life has moved into the space that death almost occupied.

The psalm that began in suffering ends in exuberance. The speaker has passed from pain to joy, made possible by the God who hears and answers in powerful, transformative ways.

Romans 6:12–23

When charting the sometimes troubled waters of Paul's argumentation, preachers and teachers often take their bearings from his use of opposites. Already in Romans, Paul has juxtaposed the figure of Adam with that of Christ (chapter 5). In Rom. 8, he will juxtapose life in the spirit with life in the flesh. In this lection, three such pairs come into play: sin versus righteousness (or sin versus God), freedom versus slavery, and wages versus gifts.

As Paul sets in opposition sin and righteousness (or sin and God), he continues the argument from the earlier part of the chapter (see the discussion on Proper 7) about Christian freedom from sin. Readers who persist in the notion that sin means failing to do something "good" or the commission of something "bad" will find themselves utterly bewildered by Paul's talk about presenting oneself "to sin"

(v. 13) and the dominion of sin (v. 14). Sin cannot, at least in the Pauline letters, be equated with transgression or trespass.

By sharp contrast, Paul understands sin as a realm of power, more than capable of ensnaring and enslaving human beings. As is clear when he anthropomorphizes sin in Rom. 6–7, Paul views sin as virtually a personal power, set up in competition with the power of God. To speak of sin's exercising "dominion in your mortal bodies" (v. 12), of being "slaves of sin" (v. 17), is to understand sin as a force of vast proportions. To speak of being freed from sin, then, does not conjure up an individual's moral victory over the inclination to do bad things. Freedom from sin, instead, is being liberated from a real and dangerous force.

The large canvas on which Paul paints Rom. 6 contains portraits of two competing powers, God and sin. Human beings exist in a relationship of freedom and enslavement to those powers. With the second pair of opposites, this dynamic comes into view. Human beings are slaves of either God or sin, and human beings are free from either God (or the demands of righteousness, which stem from God) or sin. Verses 17 and 18 set out this assumption, as Paul gives thanks for the move of Roman Christians from slavery to sin toward obedience "from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted," having become "slaves of righteousness."

With the legacy of a century of depth psychology, contemporary readers may rush to protest Paul's thought here. His assumption that one is *either* under the power of sin or free from sin, *either* obedient to righteousness or disobedient, strikes modern sensibilities as wildly naive. Again, it is necessary to recall that Paul has his eye on a competition of what we might call superpowers, God and sin. The topic here is not spiritual growth or personal development, but the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ over against the power of sin.

What is at stake for human beings comes into view with the third pair of opposites, which enters the lection only at the very end. If it is true, as Paul assumes, that every human being is free from something and every human being is enslaved to something, then one might ask whether it actually matters whether one is freed from sin. No absolute freedom lies around the corner. No autonomous life has been promised. With the third pair of opposites, however, Paul makes it quite clear that this is not a matter of indifference.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 23). A first reading of this statement might anticipate that Paul would juxtapose the "wages" of sin with the "wages" of God. Instead, this clinching assertion actually transforms the language of "wage" into "gift." Sin does pay out a wage to

its slaves, but the wage is death itself. God, however, pays no wages. Instead, God grants the gift of life. That is to say, no one earns anything from this obedience.

For many contemporary readers, Paul's use of slavery language will constitute a profound offense. Particularly in contexts where systems of human slavery lie in the not sufficiently distant past, every use of the terminology risks anger and pain. Although the workings of the slave systems of Greece and Rome were different from those of North America, they constituted a real and present factor in the regions of Paul's mission (as his letter to Philemon makes clear). It is presumably because Paul knows what slavery is that he elects such a forceful way of insisting that all human beings are, rightfully, slaves of the God who made them.

Equally offensive to modern sensibilities will be Paul's insistence that God pays no wages (v. 23). Even if no one utters a protest or enters into dispute with the text, readers of Paul again and again manage to diminish the force of his argument here. The perennial desire to believe that obedience to God somehow achieves salvation or deserves the reward of eternal life successfully silences the text. And yet it stands: eternal life is God's free gift!

Matthew 10:40–42

For three Sundays the lectionary has directed us to Jesus' missionary charge to the Twelve in Matt. 9–10. Unlike Luke, Matthew makes no mention of the actual mission itself, whether the Twelve ever went or what their mission experience was. The effect of the omission is to highlight the speech as a direct address to the readers. The audience is left not so much with a historical report of what occurred in the ministry of Jesus as with a description of its own ministry. Many of the features of the charge fit better a later period in the first century (see 10:17–23). The warnings and promises of the text, then, are warnings and promises to those long after the time of the Twelve who find themselves commissioned by 10:7–8 and who discover that the announcement of the dawn of a new age is forever risky business.

The final paragraph (10:40–42) should not in fact be separated from the rest of the speech. In a sense it responds to the sharp words of vs. 34–39 and the recognition that the gospel can and does split families, setting one member over against another. These were no less harsh words in the first century than they are today. What is of-

fered, however, is a more binding relationship than even the natural family.

In the carrying out of their mission, the disciples are rejected by some but received by others. In the welcoming process, a connection is forged between hosts ("whoever welcomes you"), disciples, Jesus ("me"), and God ("the one who sent me"). By means of the principle of identification, the four parties are joined in a profound solidarity. A new family is created of those who faithfully carry out the mission and those who openly receive the mission, and a fellowship is established that includes the divine presence. The message is not unlike that of Matt. 12:46–50, where Jesus relativizes the natural family relations and establishes a new family bound together by a common commitment to do God's will.

The new family does not *automatically* emerge to replace the support of the old family ties. It is born in the context of mission. The community "on the road" is the community needing to be welcomed and needing to receive a cup of cold water. They are the ones bonded together with the divine presence.

But attention in the text is focused not only on those bearing the message but also on those who receive the messengers. In connection with them, the word "reward" is used three times in today's paragraph. We are not told the nature of the reward. Maybe hospitality to God's messengers carries its own reward; maybe the new fellowship that emerges is the reward. In any case, the notion of reward suggests that the act of welcoming does not go unnoticed by God. God is intimately involved in the mission, both in sustaining the messengers (10:31) and in rewarding those showing hospitality.