

Proper Eight

June 29, 2008

O God be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace, that we may leave this place less of what we used to be and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

*God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am". He said, "take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I will show you.*

I have always had a fascination with the fairy tales that parents read to their children as they grow up.

Personally, I was a big fan of Rapunzel,.....remember that one.....the gal with the long hair, the tower, the witch,.....

Like most original fairy tales it does have a rather grisly side.

You might recall that the prince falls jumps out of the tower and is blinded when he lands in a patch of thorns.

When we hear stories like this, we have an inclination to try and protect our children from the more gruesome parts of these stories.

Sometimes we even change the stories to make them more palatable.....did you know in the original "beauty and beast story", the beast dies.....

And don't get me started on the original Little Mermaid story....the ending to that one is a real tear jerker.....

My favorite example of this phenomenon though is the story of Little Red Riding Hood.....

Most of you have heard the story, little girl, red hood, basket of goodies, sick grandma and big bad wolf.....if you remember the story ..

my next question is what version do you recall...

The first one I remember is the “pulp fiction version” where everybody dies.....

grandma and little red are both swallowed and the huntsmen bursts in at the end of the story and kills the wolf.....there is no resurrection for grandma or little red

How many of you have heard this version.....raise your hand

Okay, In the second version, little red riding hood and grandma are swallowed....but the huntsmen kills the wolf....slices it open and out pops grandma and a little red riding hood, as good as new, but probably a bit smelly ...

The story finishes with the huntsmen, grandma, and little red enjoying milk and cookies together....

This is my favorite version, a little gory but everything works out....

And finally, we have all heard the “official sanitized version” where grandma hides in the closet.....and the wolf chases little red riding hood around the bedroom....

.....until the huntsmen breaks down the door and...and kills the wolf who happens to be dressed in grandma’s clothes....

This is my least favorite version.....come on, what kind of lame wolf chases grandma into a closet....we all know that she gets eaten....

This version is not only dull, but unrealistic.....at least for a fairy tale....

These stories are altered by certain editors or writers, because we feel this obligation to protect children from stories that seem too violent, or just plain frightening.

Of course, I could argue that a good fairy tale with all its darker elements intact actually prepares kids for life in the real world.....

There is evil that must be confronted, white witches that need to be defeated, and happily ever after usually comes at a great cost...

As Christians, it does not help if we try to ignore the presence of evil in the world or think we if we change the story, things won't seem quite so bad...

Which brings us to this morning's Old Testament story from Genesis about Abraham and Isaac....

One of the things I love about the book of genesis is that it resists being sanitized.....from creation in the garden of Eden to Joseph with his coat of many colors...

The book is unafraid to explore all the darker aspects of our human nature.....there is hatred, greed, lust, and even murder.

These themes resurface in this morning's Old Testament story of Abraham and Isaac,....You might recall that Abraham and Sarah had struggled to have children....

and now having been given this wonderful gift of a son.....Abraham is asked to take the child and sacrifice it.....the only explanation given for this action is that God wished to test Abraham....

This is one of those Bible stories that cause most of us to scratch our heads...this is much worse than the wolf eating grandma, how do you even begin to explain this story to a child...Dad's going to do what????

I also find myself asking lots of questions....why did God ask Abraham to do such a terrible thing.....do we really believe in the kind of God that is constantly testing us...how come Abraham never seems to pause and say, "wait a minute God, you have gone too far"

Remember, Abraham had already left his homeland in Ur and journeyed to Palestine....

he had trusted that God would make his descendents as numerous as the stars in heaven.....why....did God feel the need to put him through such a horrific ordeal.....

Didn't God already know that Abraham was faithful?

And yet this unsanitized version of the story is included in scripture...and we are left to wonder what is the message we are to take away from this story.....

It has always helped me to think of the story as a negative example....maybe it is there to teach God's followers that human sacrifice is not something that our Lord desires....

maybe in Abraham's time...it was an expectation among human beings that the gods demanded human sacrifice....

Maybe the story is really about breaking free from your past and having the courage to see that God has a larger and better purpose for us... a new story that has yet to be written.....

Maybe this whole experience was a way for God to say to Abraham...I know that false gods have asked for human sacrifice...

But this is not my way...this is not how I choose to care for those I love and those I created...

Understood in this way, the story of Abraham and Isaac represents a new and marvelous beginning for God's relationship with people.

It is not to be a relationship based on fear or testing...but on a new covenant built upon the love that God has for us.....and that we are called to give this God-like love to others without condition, and without obligation....

The story of Abraham and Isaac reminds us that God is always able to write new stories and new chapters for our lives, no matter what may have done in the past....

As a visitor here this morning, one of the wonderful gifts that you bring to this new church is the gift of being able to write a new story

And in writing this new chapter, you can embrace the simple truth that you don't have to change your story to be part of this community....

part of the welcome that Christians extend to one another is this gift of hospitality.....a sense that it doesn't matter how messy or unpleasant a person's story might be...

We have at some point in our lives met a wolf in the forest, we have all felt the pain that comes from thinking that we have to change who we are to suit God...or take certain actions to make ourselves acceptable to God

But that is not how God works in our lives.....our God is a God that is more interested in our future than in our past.....

And here at St. Benedicat's, we are called into God's presence each week through worship so that we can share the precious gift of welcome that God has entrusted to us....

For to welcome others, to welcome the story they tell about their lives, is to welcome our Lord himself

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcome the one who sent me...

For this is what Christians do for one another....and this is why here at St. Benedicts my prayer and challenge for you this morning...is to strive to be that kind of place.....

A place that takes seriously the value of everyone's story and says to them we don't care what your story was in the past,

Today is the day we begin to write our own wonderful story together as God's people.....

And we have a great future ahead.....Thanks be to God....