

GOD PUT ABRAHAM TO THE “TEST”

Those are the very first words of the first reading on this Second Sunday of Lent. And the quotation marks above are important, because if we're honest, there may have been times in our lives when we imagined that some challenge we were facing was a “test” from God to see just how faithful we could be. But the fact is: God doesn't test us any more than the devil tempts us; and when we encounter those expressions in scripture or elsewhere, it's important to remember that they're not meant to be taken literally.

The famous story from the Book of Genesis recounts God's command to Abraham that he sacrifice his only son, Isaac. If it really was a “test”, then Abraham both passed and failed at the same time. He “passed” in terms of his obedience to God and his trust in this relatively new deity who had, not so long ago, changed his name and called him to leave his ancestral home. But he “failed” in thinking that the God who would come to be known as “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” was just like all the other gods of neighboring tribes who demanded child sacrifice to appease their false divinity.

The potential sacrifice of Isaac wasn't, in the end, a test. Rather, it was God's way of proving to Abraham that **this** God, **his** God, wasn't like all the rest. This God would never demand anything so horrible from his faithful people; this God would never put his chosen ones to such a terrible “test.” This God, who would later be revealed to Moses as “I Am Who Am”, needed Abraham to trust, not out of fear, but because of true devotion and deep faith. And when Abraham brought Isaac back down from that mountain, his newly restored faith became a blessing to “all the nations of the earth.”

This story of Abraham and Isaac is paired with the annual Gospel recounting of the Transfiguration—this year, of course, from Mark—and it, too, could be considered a “test” of Peter, James and John who accompany Jesus to the mountaintop. But just as the God of Abraham needed to prove something vital to him, Jesus had to reveal to these three disciples the truth of what it meant for him to be the Messiah. To be sure, he revealed his glory and his messianic relationship to the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah); but more importantly, he came back **down** from the mountain to warn the three that the path to glory would first demand the death of the “Son of Man.” After Jesus' arrest in the garden, all of them would fail that “test.”

When we find ourselves confronted by sorrow or loss, trauma or tragedy, we always need to remember that God isn't “sending” these challenges into our lives to “test” us. The God of Abraham and Isaac, the Father of Jesus, would never treat beloved sons and daughters in that way. It's life itself that “tests” us at times. But our faithful God is always here to comfort and accompany us whenever we're called down from the mountain to follow a path that even Jesus had to walk.

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