



Hearing God's Word

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Richard L. Ullman
The Second Sunday in Lent ~ March 8, 2009*

Mark 8:31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

How does God reveal God's gracious will to us? Wouldn't it be wonderful if that happened in a straight-forward manner? As in: *"God spake these words and said..."*

Sometimes, for some people, it works out like that. Sometimes we hear the Word of God plainly and clearly. Abraham heard clearly one day, as we rehearsed this morning in that perplexing, chilling tale of "The Binding of Isaac". Abraham thought he heard God saying,

"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 shall show you."

Who are you, who am I to argue? Abraham thought he heard that clear word. Obediently, he set off to do it. Obediently, Isaac went with him. "Take your son, your only son, whom you love..."

I am son of a father, and father of a son and daughters. The story reaches deep places in my heart and soul.

It would be wonderful if the word of God came to me clear and straightforward. Or so I think most hours of most days. But what if the word of God comes clearly the way it came that day to Abraham?

It was surely a heavy word for Abraham. Beyond that, a terrifying word for Isaac. In Scott Turow's novel, *The Laws of our Fathers*, the protagonist reflects on this story:

One of the thousand morals of the story of Abraham and Isaac is that the parents' ordeal — and we all have ours — will inevitably become the child's, as my father and mother's ordeal became mine, and mine no doubt became [my children's]. But it is also a tale of survival and mercy. In the end, Abraham heard his God instruct him not to set his hand against his son. Isaac was spared. He survived and surmounted. He became a parent, blind to [his own sons'] defects, but one who, pointedly, attempted no sacrifices of his own.

So I think about Isaac — ...the first son of the Western faiths — and I think about the story that is told again and again. We hear it first as children, and repeat it throughout our lives. We tell it by way of apology. And warning. We tell it with some measure of hope. We tell it because we have all been the child, we have all been Isaac, and we know the part of the story that is never mentioned. For the Bible does not record Isaac's responses. We do not know if he, like Jesus, asked, Father, why have you forsaken me? We do not know if he begged, the way most of us would, for his life. We know only this: that he obeyed. That he was a child. That because he knew nothing else, he did as his father required. We know he allowed himself to be bound in rope. We know he let his father lay him on the altar of pyramided firewood which together they had raised to God. We know he watched his father on the mountaintop raise the gleaming knife above his breastbone. We know he was a child, the son of a man with a Big Idea, who in his longing and confusion, even in his final instants, could only look to his father with that eternal if foundering hope for love.

— Scott Turow, *The Laws of Our Fathers* (1996: New York), page 524-525.

Abraham heard the word of God, all right. But it turns out he did not hear it all that clearly at first. It was only at the end that he heard, "Do not lay a hand on the boy". Only at the end did Abraham learn what the Psalmist would later sing:

Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice,
but you take no delight in burnt-offerings.
The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise.

—*Psalm 50:17-18*

Like me and you during what I suspect may be the better passages of our lives Abraham wanted to be connected to God. He observed that really pious people in his day and age did really heroic things, up to and including sacrifice of their own children. Possessed of his Big (and Holy) Idea, Abraham prayed and prayed for God's word, and heard it with all too human ears, and so almost committed an atrocity.

Almost. That's the point. He didn't, finally, commit the atrocity. If he had, there would have been no story to tell. It would have been the same ol', same ol' story of sacrifice of the first-born, familiar in Ancient Near Eastern religion. Rather, God's word broke through to Abraham in a new and startling way. At the penultimate moment, the ram appeared in the tangled undergrowth. The word came: "Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him."

Both as a father and as a son, it is easy for me to imagine the relief. No wonder Abraham called the place *Yahweh-jireh*, the LORD provides! Through the ram provided, not even the altar's fire and knife could separate him and Isaac from the love of God. (*Romans 8:39*) That was the new, previously unheard-of Word of God that Abraham heard on the mountain that day. Nothing shall separate you, my child, from the love of God.

You and I are very much in the position of Isaac. Like him, we watch Father Abraham on the mountaintop raise the gleaming knife above the breastbone. By adoption and grace, we share with Isaac that we are children of Abraham, sons and daughters of a man with a Big Idea. In our own longings and confusion, even in our final instants, often the best you and I can do is to look to Father Abraham, and to our Father in heaven, with that eternal if foundering hope for love. For, with Abraham, we want to connect with God. With Abraham, we, too, can also perfectly hear an imperfectly understood word from God. Perhaps with Isaac we can at least try not to repeat the imperfect understandings the generations before us had to overcome that we might live. We do not have to re-discover the true words of God that they with such difficulty, even terror, finally heard.

Here are some things our mothers, our fathers finally heard, words we do not have to re-discover.

The LORD our God is One; have no other gods but him.

We don't have to re-discover that.

There is nothing outside of ourselves — neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any thing else in all creation — that is able to separate us from the love of God.

We don't have to re-discover that.

Seek to save your own skin,
and you will lose your soul;
give away your life,
and you will find your soul is saved.

We don't have to re-discover that.

These three abide: faith. Hope. Love.

And the greatest of these is Love.

We don't have to re-discover that.

Isaac was spared. He survived and surmounted. He matured, and later suffered from his own distorted hearings and misunderstandings. But, pointedly, Isaac attempted no sacrifices of his own many sons.

We have been spared, so that we survive and may surmount in our own day. Pray we may live in the wisdom of all our God-connected mothers and fathers, the matriarchs and patriarchs of our life and faith. Rejoice in the rams God provided for them in their tangled spiritual undergrowth. Rehearse the true Word they finally heard.

Then listen... listen:

In what perhaps previously unheard-of way might I, might you take up our own peculiar cross in our day on the journey to God?