

The story we heard this morning from Genesis 22 is one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible; as we know, it is about Abraham who sacrifices Isaac, his son, as God commanded him to do so. Before we do anything else, I want to share with you what I went through with this text in the past couple of days. As you have, I have known the story well. I have preached on this text several times. This time, I sat down and read this text a couple of times pretending that this was my first time reading it. I just wanted to hear a fresh voice from this familiar story. And here it is. What struck me was the second part of verse 12: "for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only Son, from me."

I know there are many questions we could ask; there are many issues people raise in this story. But for me this time, this verse, especially the phrase *"for now I know that you fear God"* was speaking very loudly to me. How harsh it is for God to do such a thing! Can you imagine yourself in Abraham's position? You have this son whom you got when you were almost 100 years old? This is your hope; this is your future; and this is everything to you. And all of a sudden, you are asked to give him up. How can you explain this? What kind of God is He?

And after having poor Abraham go through that terrible test, God said, "Ok, now I know." What do you mean "now you know"? You did not know before? I thought you were the God Almighty who knows everything. What do you mean "now I know"! That sounded very strange to me.

But as I was thinking and rethinking, I kind of thought to myself "Maybe, the scripture is right; I don't think God had already known that Abraham would do what he did." That means, God gave Abraham a freedom of choice; in other words, he could follow what he was told to do or he could not do so if he did not want to; it was totally his choice.

I think one of the blessings we have is that God did not make us as a machine. We are not created as robots; our brains are not pre-programmed to act in a certain way. We human beings are born with free will; basically we are given such freedom to live lives of our own choice.

This past Thursday, Cheryl and I had a chance to visit San Quentin prison as a seminary class trip. We met there a group of inmates who were all murderers. Each and every one of that group said they killed someone and has been incarcerated over twenty years. They said they made a wrong choice at one point in their lives.

The program they were in required them to take a full responsibility for what they were doing.

Everyone said that it took many years to be where they are. For the first several years, they blamed others. But when they said, "yes, I did it; I am fully responsible for this crime," that was the beginning of new life to everyone.

God gives us a choice; in a way, life is always a continuation of making the choice between right and wrong. Our faith journey is also about making a choice, the choice between what is pleasing to me and what is pleasing to God. It is always a painful process. God gave Abraham a hard choice; how can you kill your own child in the name of pleasing God? That was just amazing. As a parent, I can't even think of this. How do you do that?

But the story says Abraham did what he did because he feared God. That was Abraham's choice. Here the meaning of the original Hebrew word for "fear" is not just "being afraid;" it is rather "to stand in awe of." That means Abraham was totally in awe of God; he was in a state of total respect; he found himself totally immersed in reverence for God.

Over the years, many Christians tried to make a connection between this Genesis story and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. They said that just like the only son of Abraham was sacrificed on the altar, Jesus, God's only begotten Son, was sacrificed on the cross for the forgiveness of sins of all humanity.

That is good imagination. But here is a problem. Isaac was not Abraham's only Son; even though it says in today's text at verse 12; Abraham had another Son called Ishmael. If you read Genesis 21, Isaac's birth to Abraham's family was not just a blessing; it was a tragedy too. It was because as soon as Isaac was born, they had to make Ishmael, their first Son, go away with his mother Hagar. In fact, that was the beginning of all the conflict that we have between Israelites and Arabs. Isn't that amazing?

But know this: in Genesis 21:18, God is assuring Hagar and Ishmael that God will also make a great nation of Him. This is a promise we do not usually pay our attention to. So this is a little surprise to many of us who have been taught to think that God's blessings are only for Isaac and his descendants. When I read this, I could not ignore this promise given to Ishmael. In fact, when I re-read the chapter 22 story in the context of the story of Ishmael, the whole story sounded differently to me.

I had to ask myself: "Why did God have Abraham give up his son Isaac right after Abraham and Sarah kicked out Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness?" If I were Abraham, my love for my two sons would be the same. And I would have felt that God was telling me

something through this incident.

This leads us to today's Matthew text. Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." Jesus does not say certain people; Jesus does not say a particular people; he says "whoever." Whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will be rewarded. For God so loved the world, not a certain group or nation but the world, that He have His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16). There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28) Jesus does not discriminate us; he welcomes us regardless of who we are and what we did in our lives.

The San Quentin prisoners: everyone in that group looked peaceful; I could tell from their faces; even though they were locked up there, they were all free men; they were happy ones because they had peace in their hearts; they had peace from God.

People call them murderers; the world does not want them to be back on the streets; that is why they are there for many years. But I saw clearly that day God welcomed them. I saw God's welcoming grace in those criminals.

Those guys really changed my perception of San Quentin. It was just amazing to see how God's love can change people. They even gave me a challenging question to me. A question to myself: Do I have the same peace as they have?

God is good. He is not only good; He welcomes us all the time; He chose to love us even when we did not know Him. No one in the world cannot stop God's such welcoming grace. God's such grace is powerful; it changes our thoughts and minds; it changes our lives; it gives us peace.

Problem is that we have to make a choice every day—the choice to accept God's love, the choice to be on God's side. We need to see what God sees; God does not have a second thought; He shows an unchanging love regardless of who we are. Not only that, he gives us opportunities to serve others with the love we have from God. I hope we all meet this God and share His love with others. Amen.