

Ken Minkema
“(K)nights of Faith”
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Intro to Scripture Readings

Our Old Testament reading recounts the famous, and somewhat disturbing, story of Abraham’s readying to sacrifice his only son Isaac at the command of God. For some, it harks to parallel stories in mythology, such as Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia in order to appease the goddess Artemis so that his ships could sail for the fateful siege of Troy. For others, the unspoken agony of Abraham in the tautly written text is a thing of wonder. I would only point to a couple of things, one geographical, one figural. First, the site of the sacrifice, Mt. Moriah, was where part of Solomon’s temple was later built, and also a part of the range of hills that included Mt. Calvary, where of course Jesus was crucified. That physical promity leads to a figural one: in his willingness to sacrifice his own only son, Abraham symbolizes God the Creator, who was willing to sacrifice his only begotten Son in order to provide a Redeemer. So the tale is one of faith and of sacrifice on the human and divine levels.

The New Testament reading, from Romans 6, is part of an extended discussion by the apostle Paul on the relation of sin and grace. Justification is shown by sanctification, by a holy life that heeds God's commands and will, of which Abraham is an exemplar. Sanctification, in turn, consists of "mortification" of sin, or the death of sin in the individual, and "vivification," or newness of life, newness of heart. Thus the writer of Proverbs tells us, in one of my favorite biblical texts, "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life" (I like the King James translators' use of the word "issues," with its double entendre). The sanctified heart, as 17th-century biblical commentator Matthew Henry wrote, "chooses new paths to walk in, new leaders to walk after, new companions to walk with." One is free, but free to do what? To live as we list? God forbid, Paul states. The paradox of Christian freedom is that one is freed from service to sin in order to serve God and righteousness—thus in willing obedience is liberation.

Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

One of the perils of preaching in the summer is that the lectionary usually deals with some of the more thorny passages of the Bible, under the assumption that the people who come to church during these months are faithful attenders, the hardcore, so to speak, if that's of any consolation to you. So there are few if any "alleluia" stories to be dealt with, or warm-and-fuzzy lessons to be heard. No, we get to grapple with the tough stuff, like Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, or advanced Christian theological doctrines such as the nature of justification. Gee, thanks a lot. Well, let's see what we can make of it.

Let me begin with what may seem a bit of a digression, a bit of history—which perhaps should not come as too much of a surprise to those of you who know me. I like that members of this congregation have been for a long time given the opportunity to come forward and lead worship, to pray, to share musical gifts, to give testimonies—and I believe that many of you share that pleasure. So too I am gratified to see the recent groundswell of involvement among the membership, ordained but especially lay, that is stepping forward in this transitional time to offer their gifts. And that includes giving sermons. I work on one of the greatest preachers in American history, Jonathan Edwards, and I must say that even by his standards we've had some very well-crafted

and inspiring homilies by members of this surprising congregation--but I don't have to tell you that.

It feels, in a way—doesn't it?—as if, in the wake of recent events, we are starting over again, re-constituting ourselves, contemplating the future while drawing on our past. That past reaches back to the very origins of Congregationalism in the late sixteenth century, when the tradition of lay leadership was established in the particular expression of the Protestant Reformation that comes down to us today as the United Church of Christ. An important part of that tradition was Separating Congregationalism, what we know today as Puritanism or the Dissenters. (Yes, we are the Dissenters, the modern-day version anyway.) There were certainly undesirable aspects to them, and as such they were people of their time: only men could vote, and however much they tried to remove themselves, the churches were embedded in a colonizing, slave-owning imperial system.

But there were also progressive attitudes at work in these communities. Like-minded individuals came together out of common need and a shared intuition to form their own body of believers and seekers; they wrote their own covenants, which they all publicly vowed to hold. They told their stories to each other. While they sometimes did

so under the auspices of an ordained person, more often they did not. Most often they lacked any considerable resources, yet found a way to do the work of a church. They took the responsibility for worship, for charity, and for mutual watch amongst themselves, only later finding a pastor to lead them. Or, in times when they were lacking a pastor, the laity stepped in to take care of each other individually and as a church. Remember that the settlers of Plymouth, Massachusetts, had no pastor for years but were guided by laity such as William Bradford and William Brewster. Those “Pilgrims” of yore, whom we love to romanticize, were radicals in their time for their conception of community and of true religion.

What is more, members of these reforming congregations called each other “saints.” This was of course an extension of the Protestant concept of the communion of the saints. Saints were no longer abstract paragons of virtue, martyrs, miracle workers, mythological figures, those canonized and, as these reformers perceived, idolized. This notion of sainthood was an expression of faith in the experience of the common Christian, the ordinary person sitting in the pew, to carry on the work of divine mercy and justice in the world. That in itself was the miracle, so

that everyone could become saints, experiencing their own trials and victories, writing their own *vitas*.

Sound familiar? Here we are, no settled ministers over us, an uncertain financial future, but grounded in a long tradition and in each other, as saints (though I'm the first to admit that whatever halo I may have is most certainly tarnished and askew). We have a covenant, a "vision statement," to which we have pledged our troth. And we have, I dare to say, the desire to trust in God and in each other. Those are good places to start.

Another good place to start is with Scripture and the models it provides. These models call us to realize the better angels of our natures. Abraham went through many trials, disappointments, and self-denials—he left his own family and country, he experienced warfare, he and his wife Sarai were long denied a child, he had to cast out the surrogate Hagar and her child Ishmael (though I think that must have been worse for Hagar and Ishmael than for Abraham)—biblical scholars identify no less than ten major trials of Abraham's faith. In the end, he is held up for having loved God better than his father, and loving God better than his son. That's quite a difficult standard to follow, if not an impossible one.

But then, after all he went through, he was in the land God had promised, and he had a son; his posterity, which God promised would be as the sands of the shore, seemed secure. So he probably did not expect any more storms. But then, one sharper than any other came: God called on him to sacrifice Isaac, in whom Abraham had invested so much hope. Imagine the welter of emotions that must have possessed him. But yet he steeled himself and obeyed, even travelling three days to the place God appointed. Once there, he prepared the altar, the wood, bound Isaac, drew his knife and held it high, ready to deal the blow.

In his short but profound work, *Fear and Trembling*, the 19th-century Danish religious philosopher Soren Kierkegaard writes of the “knight of infinity” and of the “knight of faith.” A knight of infinity give up her heart’s desire without any expectation that she will get back what she has lost in this life, in the hope that the next life will bring resolution. An unrequited love, perhaps like that of Dante for Beatrice, makes the sufferer a knight of infinity. But the knight of faith resigns all in the full expectation that she will regain in this life what she has surrendered. For Kierkegaard, Abraham was the knight of faith because, in resigning himself to obey God’s command to sacrifice his only son in whom the divine promise to Abraham’s posterity was embodied, he

thereby rose above all normative ethical considerations, and above the world; but in being willing to resign all, Isaac, and all he represented, was returned to Abraham. The angel of the Lord—a pre-incarnational name for Christ, the Second Person--comes at the last moment to stay Abraham's awful hand. Job is another biblical example, deprived of everything, suffering everything, but still justifying God.

Usually individuals who have to face such decisions inhabit the realms of mythology or fiction. Trolling the internet, I have seen popular figures such as Batman called a knight of faith—one of the films in the series is even called "The Dark Knight." More akin to the likes of you and me, perhaps, is Charlie Brown, another knight of faith who always believes he won't get a rock for Halloween or that he will actually be able to kick that football held by Lucy.

Surely, if good ol' Charlie Brown is a knight of faith, then we can be one too. Faith and trust in God, despite whatever losses we have endured, and whatever uncertainty we bear about what is to come, can make Abrahams of us all. If Abraham's silent obedience in the face of God's terrible command seems unreal, beyond us, consider what sacrifices, what wrenching decisions we have to make. Consider, for example, a life partner or a child who has to make the terrible decision

to take a loved one or a parent off of life support. How is this any less heart-rending than what Abraham must have felt? And yet it is done, on almost a daily basis, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection and of reunion with loved ones in the embrace of the divine.

Hopefully, we won't have the same kinds of trials that Abraham, Job, Ruth, Mary, Bruce Wayne, or even Charlie Brown had. And yet, we do and we will have our own trials, individually and collectively. But we are all saints, and therefore knights. Therefore, let us go forth, in faith and in newness of life. Amen.