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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/24/2010, Midweek Lent 1
Genesis 22:1-19, The Sacrifice of Isaac
Also, Mark 15:29-23, Darkness at Noon

PRAYER OF THE DAY

P Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

FIRST LESSON.....Genesis 22:1-19, RSV

¹After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." ²He 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 upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." ⁶And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. ⁹When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." ¹²He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD will provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." ¹⁵And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies,

¹⁸and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” ¹⁹So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

HOLY GOSPEL Mark 15:29-33, KJV

²⁹And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, ³⁰Save thyself, and come down from the cross. ³¹Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. ³²Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him. ³³And when the sixth hour was come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and *he cut the wood* for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (Genesis 22:3, RSV)

With what a heavy heart Abraham must have cut that wood! He worked away, a good laborer cutting his kindling, but what sorrow must have darkened his mind as he flung his hatchet.

When I was a boy growing up on the little farm down there in Maryland, one of my chores was to bring in wood from the wood pile. When the weather was wintry, naturally we needed the wood to heat the house. But even in the summertime, we needed wood because my grandmother cooked on a wood-burning stove. I wonder whether young folk can even picture such a thing. The stove is like a self-contained fireplace with its own chimney. My grandmother had an iron rod, somewhat like a small crowbar, which would fit in a notch under a round disk in the heavy iron top of the stove. She could use that little crowbar to pry up the disk and shove it to the side, so that she could drop pieces of wood into the stove. The top of the stove, then, became hot and she could cook on it. And my! Could she cook! I still have good memories of her biscuits and buns and bacon and eggs and so on.

So, we needed wood year-round, and my job was to make sure the wood pile on the porch was well supplied with wood from the chopping block out in the yard.

That was my grandfather's job: to chop the wood. The tree trunks could be sawed into manageable size cylinders, but those cylinders were often too thick to fit into the wood burning stove, so my grandfather would chop the wood, with a downward stroke, slicing the wood into more slender pieces.

One day his axe slipped and struck him in the leg. The downward blow glanced off the wood and struck his leg, with the blood, then, a'flying. It was a

serious accident. My grandfather kept his axe sharp. The blow must have hit some big blood vessel.

To my grandfather, it seemed like no big deal. He was close to the land, like pioneer folk. He had probably suffered many accidents over his long life. The family gathered around him, stopped the bleeding somehow, and soon he mended and was back to work.

Now, let me venture this thought, with fear and trembling: I would not have wondered if Abraham, in the heaviness of his heart, had let his axe slip in its downward movement and struck himself some mortal blow. I certainly would *not* have commended that path. And yet, would it have been such a surprising accident compared to the troubling purpose for which he was cutting this wood: that he might sacrifice his own son on that wood!

This evening's Gospel Reading reports that there was darkness across the land in midday, that awesome day when Jesus died. Naturally! It had to be so! Nature itself could only reflect the heartache of the Father as he beheld the crucifixion and death of his Son. This evening's sun is setting at its proper time. Fine. Dusk is coming along when it should. But on that first Good Friday, the sun could not emit its light even at midday. From noon till 3 p.m. there was darkness in the land as Jesus was dying. The sun's shoulders sagged and it had no strength left to shine, it sympathized so with its Maker at the death of the Son.

The story of the Sacrifice of Isaac can certainly be understood as a story of the obedience of Isaac to his father, Abraham. He is, after all, a young man who honors his father. Abraham says, "We're up and on to Mt. Moriah," and the son readily goes along. It is a mysterious trip, for where is the lamb to be sacrificed, but mysterious or no, Isaac dutifully goes along.

But this time around, I'm not so much moved by Isaac as by the old man. The thought of sacrificing your own son is so appalling that I could not have blamed Abraham, I say, if he had let his axe slip and struck himself some fatal blow.

Likewise, when Abraham raised his knife to slay his son, I think the greatest wonder of all is that he was able to hear the angel of the Lord when that angel interrupted him and said "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him." To my mind, it is a wonder and miracle that Abraham had been able to hear the angel, for I imagine he had to have driven himself into sheer madness to even begin the melancholy deed the angel is able to interrupt.

We honor Jesus for his willingness to die on the Cross that we might be saved. But let us ponder the heavenly Father too who permitted such a thing. No, Abraham did not and must not actually sacrifice his Son, but the Heavenly Father did not spare his Son, nor Himself on that sad Friday afternoon. His heart had gone on beating for centuries, for ages upon ages, but it is a wonder that that old heart did not simply break when he beheld the sacrifice of his Son.

You are loved by a mighty, mighty love. To have permitted such a thing as the sacrifice of the Son, you must be worth a powerful amount to all three of the divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Magnify the Father's heartbreak at the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Let your imagination ponder the divine pain at the death of the Son. Let that pain and sorrow enlarge to fill heaven and earth, indeed to fill the noble heart of your Maker. *That* is how much he loves you. God the Father did what he could not permit Abraham to do: he accepted the willingness of his Son to die for you and for me. He let that deed be done, that you and I might have a chance in this world and in all eternity, through the grace and merits of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.