

Process of Preparation

Genesis 22:1-14: From Text to Proclamation

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THIS ARTICLE IS A PAPER ALSO PREPARED FOR THE SYMPOSIUM ON "ABRAHAM AND Archaeology." On Sunday, February 27, 1972, the author preached a sermon on Gen. 22:1-14, the account of the sacrifice of Isaac. Later the author discussed his preparation for the preaching task with the conference. The sermon as transcribed from the taped delivery, not as it appeared in manuscript, is printed as the last section of the article. The author is professor of homiletics and ethics at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

How did I conceive this sermon just delivered to you on the story of Abraham's ordeal in the sacrifice of Isaac? This paper is a description of the process of reflection that I engaged in while preparing the sermon. I hope that this look over my shoulder as I ruminated in my study might be the most concrete way of indicating how I leap from the "then and there" of a Biblical text to a "here and now" proclamation of the Word.

Naturally, this is not a stereotypic process that is followed rigidly every time the challenge to preach presents itself. Nor do the facets of reflection occur in isolation from each other. In reality the mind darts now on the text and now on the situation. Nevertheless, what follows does represent a fair description of my basic process of reflection in sermon preparation.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PREACHING

Any preacher worth his salt comes to the sermonic task with some basic assumptions about what preaching is and what it is for. Perhaps it would be well for me to lay these cards on the table first. This perspective on preaching sets the direction for my way of going about sermon preparation.

1. *Preaching is bringing into words the Word of God.* The Word of God is the coming of God in judgment and grace. Preaching is never merely telling about God, but preaching is the proclamation of the Word of God in which God Himself acts and reveals Himself to the hearer. (1-Cor. 1:17-18; Rom. 1:17)

Preaching is not just the exposition of a text, but it is fundamentally the application of the lively Word. It is not just the explanation of a doctrine, but the narration of a saving event, the proclamation of a healing power that is given, the exhortation to a hearer about to be grasped by grace. Preaching is not just informing the hearer but transforming the hearer. Preaching is the "language of the heart" in which the "light dawns" and the freedom of faith is born and nurtured.

2. *Preaching is relating the Word to life.* Preaching is "bifocal": The preacher looks realistically at life as it is lived on the one hand, and views these same events from the perspective of the church's faith regarding God's presence in the world on the other hand.

Preaching involves showing the hearer how his life and action are in reality a response to God's action in the world. It

involves unfolding the meaning of general truths by digging in the soil of human struggles and the subsoil of the Word of God. Preaching "breaks the ice" when the Word is addressed with an "empirical fit."

The skill of becoming aware in depth of what is most personal is the key to understanding what is most general. The skill of seeing "truths" within "events" is the key to incarnation of what is otherwise "docteric" theological jargon. "Sin" is indefinable, but it can be phenomenally described; e.g., "fearing the fist in the window more than we trust in God." "Love" is indefinable, but loving activity can be probed in terms of the healing that occurs when giving and receiving between persons takes place, e.g., the Good Samaritan.

3. *Preaching is proclamation of the Gospel.* It is heralding the Gospel so that it is meaningfully related to the hearer's life situation and can be the Spirit's instrument of persuasion to move the hearer in the freedom of faith to love.

Preaching without the Gospel is moralism or legalism. The preacher who uses the abstract noun "Gospel" talks about food but does not feed the hearer. The preacher who says, "Jesus died for your sins; you better believe it," turns the Gospel into new law with a loving voice. Preaching that merely plugs up past mistakes, but does not proclaim God's freeing power for the future activity of the hearer, is "cheap grace."

Preaching is uniquely Christian only when the Gospel is the key dynamic in the word encounter. The critical question that must be asked about the content of a sermon is, "Why was Jesus Christ necessary in this sermon?" Or to put it another way, "What kind of encounter with Jesus

Christ did the hearer have through the Word that was preached to him?"

4. *Preaching is Biblical.* "Only authentically biblical preaching can be really relevant; only vitally relevant preaching can be really biblical." (John Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching*)

Preaching is "biblical" when the text is related to the central message of God's redemptive activity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is meaningful when that activity of God in Christ is related to the life of the hearer.

The skill of relating every passage to the Gospel before one is through understanding the intended meaning of the passage is the key to leaping the two-thousand-year time gap from the text to the present. The preacher lets God's accusing and reviving Word come through the text, enabling him better to "see" God's judgment and grace present in the hearer's life today.

5. *Preaching is personal witness.* Preaching is the "language of the heart." The preacher gives his reason for the hope of man. The anguish of the preacher is his participation in life and death struggles. The joy of preaching is his being grasped by grace. A preacher is born by living and dying, by being accused and being revived by his God, not by merely thinking, reading and musing. What makes preaching dull is not poor illustration but divorce from life. The preacher creates a "credibility gap" when he offers passionate rhetoric about the Word and about a life in which he himself does not participate.

THE POINT OF THE TEXT

Preaching is essentially the execution of the Word of God in the life of the hearer. It is not essentially an exposition of a text

But if the preacher uses a text (and there are good reasons for using a text), he ought to maintain the integrity of that text. He ought to know and indicate what purpose, meaning, and intention the author had in mind when he wrote the text to his hearers in their situation.

The preacher does not have to make the original point of the text the central thought of his sermon. In such a case, however, he needs to indicate to his congregation that there is a valid indirect application of the text, assuming that he knows what the direct goal (*skopos*) of the text was. One must realize that what a text meant cannot be transposed into what the Word in the text means for us without the guidance of the Spirit.

There is no need for me to go into a description of the methods that can be employed in studying this text. That is what the conference is all about. I wish only to isolate the goal (*skopos*) of the text as I saw it.

The sacrifice of Isaac must be placed into the context of God's promise to Abraham. That promise stated that God would give Abraham a land, make him the father of a great nation, and through his progeny make him a blessing to the nations. The promise was threatened when Sarah did not conceive a child through which the progeny would increase. Abraham was pushed beyond reason to trust that God would keep His promise nonetheless.

In this light, the sacrifice of Isaac involves an incredible test for Abraham. It is not the test of his loyalty to God over against his love for his son. Rather, God by His Word called Abraham to kill the human vehicle by which His promise to Abraham would be fulfilled. Abraham was

driven beyond religion, that is, beyond his trust in the human medium by which God is present in promise to men. Abraham was forced to hold to the gracious presence of the Promiser even when His call to execute the vehicle of promise was heard. Abraham's faith was thus a response to the God who covenanted with him in grace, and thus he was able to hope against hope.

Since Christian preaching is proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it is necessary to see this text through the prism of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For St. Paul the understanding of the promise centers in Jesus Christ. In Him all God's promises are affirmed as true. Through the death of Christ a new covenant is established, and all nations are brought into that covenant of grace. The Spirit of Christ begets new sons, heirs of the inheritance of the world and of life from the dead.

In the light of the point of the text, I stressed in the sermon the idea that in the death of Christ God offers the supreme outpouring of His grace by which one can live in the community of faith. I drew an analogy between God's call to Abraham to kill the child of promise and God's execution of His own Son. Both are moments of judgment and awe, but both bring to light the fact that God is full of grace and truth.

THE PRESENT SITUATION

After I had discerned the message in the text, I searched for a visceral reaction to the question, "Where does this grab you?"

At first it seemed impossible to find points of comparison between Abraham's unique crisis situation and our generally ordinary lives. But the preacher is not pri-

marily concerned to find parallel *situations* but to see how that God who judges and promises is judging and promising in our situation, whatever it may be.

A second problem I faced was to make applications of the Word that would relate to your situation as hearers and not merely to my own. This was a particular problem on this occasion because I did not know many of you. But this was no reason to despair. Carl Rogers was right when he said, "What is most personal is most general." The chances were pretty good that if I would talk about the real struggles in my life, and not just surface symptoms, I would touch my hearers in terms of our common humanity.

Armed with the point of the Word in the text, I began to rummage through my situation and yours in this time and place. Here are some of the items that came to mind.

1. As a father with three daughters and a son, I identified immediately with Abraham's personal anguish. I shuddered at the thought that I might be called by God to kill my son. This reminded me of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. It reminded me of sacrificing lesser pearls in order to possess the pearl of great price. The quote "The good is the enemy of the better" darted into my mind. Is there a "suspension of the ethical" in the face of God's call to faith? The possibilities in this direction were many, and I was sure that the message coming from any one of them would be valid and important.

But I had to discipline myself to get out of that arena entirely in this situation. This was not the point of the text. The issue for Abraham was not a conflict between the value of his son and the value of God.

The call was not to deny the finite in favor of the infinite. Kierkegaard himself in later years recognized the problem of taking this route, for it would lead to a denial of the world and a flight into the beyond. It became apparent that this would not be the best or the safest text to use in dealing with the questions of idolatry and radical monotheism.

2. I rummaged through my years in the pastoral ministry for events that would depict the agony of a father whose child had died. One might take such crisis situations and the feeling of God's judgment and abandonment that they precipitate and make a go of it. I discarded this direction because it, too, did not seem to get at the unique or the particular point of the text. Likewise, I did not feel that I knew the group well enough at a personal level to bring off anything more than a generalized cliché on this subject.

3. Then I remembered an indirect application I had once made of the story. It was in a sermon on the theme "Judge Not." I posed the question "If you saw old Abraham lifting his knife over his boy, what judgment would you make of him?" It is an interesting point, and on another occasion I would not hesitate to expand on it. But neither the subject of not judging nor the indirect application seemed appropriate for this occasion.

4. The irony of Abraham's situation struck me. He was asked by God to kill the human vehicle by which the promise was to be realized. This was not unlike the call of a pastor to judge critically in God's stead the very church he serves, the liturgy that is worshiped and even the sacraments dispensed, when these stand in the way of grace alone, faith alone. This

pushed me into our present situation with our particular problems surrounding the study of the Bible with the historical-critical method. Such study results in the apparent death of the medium of promise, and it creates great pain in the scholar and panic in the church. Is God forcing us to give up our neat, eloquent proofs that make grace alone and faith alone unnecessary? This seemed a most pertinent and lively subject to pursue—one that was right on the Word in the text.

5. Finally, I sensed a kind of parallel between the hard word Abraham received and the cold silent Word of God often experienced in our secular age. At this point I realized that our situation is quite different from Abraham's on the surface. He believed in God and feared only that God would not keep His promise. In a secular age God is silent, and men of faith fear that He may be dead. The difference is there, but the Spirit seemed to dare me to go in this direction. The silence of God is a word that kills. But that silence may also be the moment in which God speaks to us again.

This would be difficult to bring off, especially in a group that might not identify directly with the problem of doubt in the modern era. But are we not all infected by the secular spirit and its doubt? I gave it a whirl.

DIAGNOSIS

The mark of a good doctor of medicine is his ability to make a precise and incisive diagnosis of symptoms. Too often preachers prescribe aspirin solutions because they diagnose human headaches as headaches only. The human headache is rooted in a malady that calls for radical radium treatment. It is crucial that the

surface symptoms be followed through to their underlying causes before one attempts a solution.

Luther gave me the key to diagnosis when he said, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe. . . ." I was always taught that lovelessness is the symptom of the fact that I do not radically fear, love, and trust God above all things. In other words, the capacity to love another person genuinely (*agape*) presupposes the freedom of faith. Every problem of lovelessness is, among other things, an expression of a state of being in unfaith. Luther radicalized the problem by adding, "It is not simply that I do not trust God above all, but I cannot trust God above all."

The key to good diagnosis is to ask the question "Why?" It must be posed again and again until the basis of the problem becomes crystal clear. A certain kind of mischief is rooted in the bondage of unfaith under the tyranny of sin, Law, and death.

Situation 1: A. Symptoms: In the first situation the surface symptoms are clearly evident. There is a visible panic in some churches over historical criticism. In our Synod it is particularly acute and threatens to divide the Synod itself.

The pain is felt by Biblical scholars who use the method. It would be naïve to think that they do not feel the tremors that rigorous inspection of the Biblical record sets off. They are not always sure they should do this kind of work in the light of the panic it creates in people in the churches they want to serve.

The anxiety is acute among many of the clergy and some of the laity. They fear that this dissection of the Bible will result in losing the sure Word of Promise.

B. Diagnosis: Why do scholars engage in such rigorous critical study of the Bible? One possible answer is that they don't believe the Promise themselves and that therefore they are consciously or unconsciously trying to undermine the faith of childlike believers. This should be tested. The preacher must be radically honest with himself. "Is this why I am doing this?" Maybe he will discover that his love for books and his sense of power in having superior knowledge is in fact influencing his work. This should be unmasked by God's accusing finger. (But this is a problem that would take us off the actual problem in the text. I find myself constantly having to keep my eye on the particular goal for the day lest the shots be scattered everywhere.)

Why do both scholars and lay people fear the enterprise? Is it because they believe the authority of the Word is threatened by this historical method? Is it because they hold that if one can't be sure about six 24-hour days at creation one can't be sure about the promise of God? Such questions must be looked at very carefully. If one discovers that the problem is simply poor theology, then he need not be so concerned. The solution lies in showing a person that the authority of the Scriptures is not threatened by such a method. The chances are, however, that the problem cannot be engaged merely on a noetic or rational level but that one must probe the deeper dimensions, the "gut level."

For years we felt we had an eloquent reason for being sure that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. We had the Book. As long as we had that, we had certainty about our faith. This was in fact a temptation to unfaith. It made the book the object of

our salvation. We had the illusion that we could believe by pointing to a book rather than hoping against hope in the Promise. This is not to say that we did not believe in God's grace in Christ alone. It meant that we believed that *and* clung to our own securities as well. The call of Abraham was the call to let go of all such securities.

This is the most terrible ordeal of all. The problem is not simply that we do not trust God, but that God in His judgment gives us good reason not to trust Him.

Situation 2: A. Symptoms: Even those who believe in a secular society have a tendency to sense that the encounter with God is pushed to the periphery of life. We engage in a lot of God-talk but often have very little God-experience. The current charismatic movement in part reflects an attempt to break through a rather sterile church life. The secular spirit, which stresses contingency, relativism, and pragmatic humanism, works its way—often unconsciously—into our ministry. We sometimes wish we were in work that would produce more tangible results. We sometimes wonder if theology is ideology and religion mere wish-fulfillment. We don't see tangible results either in our life or in the lives of those we serve that would put our doubts to rest. We call to heaven to speak up, but the sky is mute.

B. Diagnosis: One has to distinguish carefully between the mature manhood of the secular man and his self-deification. Is technology evil and man the manipulator of nature playing God? Is the problem that we have lost a childlike old-time faith? This is not necessarily the case. God gave man the power to create his own world in the world of nature. This is the grandeur of man. There is potential progress in

technology, and there is much warmth in secular humanism.

But there is an ambiguity in this human progress. We have created our own good and evil. We have declared our independence from our Maker. Learning to live without reference to magic is one thing. Learning to live without the realization that life is a gift and we are free in response to the grace of the Maker of heaven and earth is something else.

Again the problem is not merely that we push God to the periphery of our lives and even go our own way without Him. But when we grow anxious and call for Him to prove that He is there, He is eloquently silent. This silence is His judgment, and it is our dread. No wonder the problem is not simply that we do not believe, but that we cannot believe.

PROGNOSIS

... but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith. . . ." If the problem is some expression of our inability to trust God, then the solution can only be found in that which creates and nurtures the miracle of faith. The Gospel is God's answer to the problem of God and our unfaith. It is the good news that God is for us even in the fact of His judgment against us. God reaches out to say "Yes" even in silence. The Gospel is the coming into words of God's activity in the world in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In the proclaiming of the Promise in Christ, the Spirit performs the miracle of faith.

"... that which is of faith is a good work." The goal of every sermon is in fact the creation and nurture of faith in the Prom-

ise. What I hope will happen when I preach is that the hearer will be grasped by grace so that he might be free in faith to hope and to love. My main interest is not changing his moral standard or his life style. Changes in both of these may in fact happen, but they deal only with what the hearer does. I am after what the hearer is. The Gospel is the Word that begets new creation and new identity and enables a person to live in the freedom of sonship.

The crucial test questions to ask about every sermon are, "Why was Jesus Christ necessary in this sermon? What kind of an encounter with Christ did the hearer have in this sermon?" I try to include, yet press beyond the Christ who reveals God's love. I try to include, yet press beyond the Christ who gives us the Spirit power to love. I press all the way to the Christ whose death and resurrection changes God's silence and judgment into grace. This is the ground of faith.

Situation I and II: The scapegoat in the text is a clue to God's solution to His call to kill the promise God Himself makes the sacrifice. This moves us into the crucifixion of Christ.

The problem I faced in preparing this sermon was the understandable fear that the hearer shortcut the dread in this text by looking to the nice solution at the end of the story. The fact is that that was not an "and they lived happily ever after" ending. Abraham died without seeing the promise fulfilled. Realizing this moved me into a recapitulation of the events in the life of Christ. On that occasion God took His own Son, who is the sign of promise, and executed Him. In that event and in

the resurrection that followed, the terrible Word of God is trumped by good news.

My concern was to have the hearer "hit bottom" so that bouncing up in the resurrection of Christ he would be free for anything. That "anything" would include the venture into dissection of the Bible that in no way could threaten the promise. It would include enduring the silence of God that in no way belies that He speaks His words of love to us.

I wish there would have been more time to show what this would mean in terms of a ministry of love to other people. I generally do not concentrate so much on faith that the love consequence is not explored. The horizontal expression of the freedom of faith is *agape*, love. In most cases, talking about person-to-person relationships and the need for love in them is the best way to get at the very stuff regarding faith this sermon was about.

Much more could have been said about God's gracious activity in Word and Sacraments and the church. The sermon is somewhat personalistic, but so is the text. However, on other occasions the setting of the corporate context of the church would be more in focus.

HOMILETICAL CHECKUP

Preaching is application of the Word, and the process of thought by which one correlates Word and life is the preacher's homiletical method. My own way of thinking is ruled by asking and answering three basic questions. They form my final check list on the subject matter.

1. What do I hope will happen to the hearer as a result of my proclaiming the Gospel to him today? The general answer that must be made specific in terms

of a given hearer in a given context is: I hope the Spirit will free the hearer in faith for love (*agape*).

2. Why does the hearer need to hear this good news? The general answer that must be made concrete in each sermon is: He needs to hear it because he continues in the bondage of unfaith under the tyranny of sin, Law, and death.

3. What specific proclamation of God's activity in Jesus Christ and His Spirit should I make so that God's Word of grace might free the hearer in faith for love (*agape*)?

In this instance the specific need centered in the panic, fear, and trembling that occurs in the hearer's heart when he is faced by a terrible Word of God or a terrible silence of God. How can we believe in a God who kills the very medium of His own promise?

The goal was to free the hearer from the need for eloquent proofs of God's promise. It was to evoke in him a "hope against hope," which is the positive basis for returning to a threatened world with joy and love.

The means of achieving this goal was the proclamation that the reliability of the promise is present precisely in the moment at which God executes His own Son. In the cross the judgment and silence of God are terrible, but precisely in the cross the covenant promise is fulfilled.

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS

The sermon is not finished merely when one has decided what he is going to say. Content does not constitute communication. Communication takes place between persons in a certain time and place. It is not simply what one says that is crucial, but how he says it. It is not simply what

one says that must be considered, but also in what relation he is with the persons to whom he is saying it. It is not simply what one says, but what one says first, or last, or what he chooses not to say, that will determine communication. It is not simply what one says, but why he is saying it that will determine whether he is at cross purposes with his hearers. The punch of a joke lies in the order of the words and the timing of the delivery. Communication calls for a host of considerations. Let me mention just a few in connection with this sermon.

1. *Organizing the material.* There are two important considerations here. One is defining and confining the material. This is essential if the sermon is not to die the death of a thousand generalizations. It is essential if the sermon is to make a unified impact and not scatter shots everywhere so that the hearer can't get a handle on anything.

In this instance, I zeroed in on the unique element of the text. Abraham must believe the Promise even when the Promiser calls for the execution of the human instrument by which the promise is to be fulfilled. Thematically this can be reduced to the panic that is ours in response to the word that kills and the promise that produces hope against hope. Ergo the title, "Panic or Promise."

A second consideration in organizing material is the question of the type of continuity to be used. We rarely use the old "theme and parts" approach today, but a sermon has to have a spinal cord nonetheless. This spinal cord is the continuity of thought that provides for the sermon a logic and a flow that will enable

the hearer to move along with the preacher.

The continuity of this sermon is very simple. First of all, it is based on the old model of exposition of a text followed by application of the Word. I decided in favor of this approach even though I knew that the hearer could possibly be weary of the account because of three days study of Abraham. I felt that the drama of this event is so startling and alive that it could be retold in such a way that application would already be taking place in the telling of it. Second, I could not be certain that what I had come to see as the precise point of the text and its message would be understood by everyone without adequate exposition.

The second dimension of continuity was the problem-solution model. My first impulse was to go:

- I. Problem
 - A. Abraham's
 - B. Ours
- II. Solution
 - A. For Abraham
 - B. For us

I discovered that in this case the solution was so closely linked to the problem that they could not be neatly separated. The floor plan ended up even simpler:

- I. Abraham's Problem and Solution
- II. Our Problem and Solution

2. *Incarnating the material.* To have good ideas is one thing; to give them a concrete fit in empirical reality is something else. Again the drama of the text was a help here. Furthermore, my way of thinking about the sermonic task demanded that I reflect on human problems, passions and joys. My concern was not

only to have longer illustrations, but to turn every phrase I could in the direction of the concrete, the empirical, the experiential.

There are two quite different kinds of illustrations. One is to design an analogy to convey an idea. The image of a cross-country skier seeks to draw an analogy between his race and the pilgrimage of our life under duress. Such analogies are important for teaching ideas, but they do not reach the inner recesses of the heart.

The other kind of illustration is to narrate events in life that are pregnant with the presence of God's judgment and grace. Faith involves remembering such events and witnessing to their meaning. Thus the key elements in the sermon are the Abraham story, our experience as students of the Bible, and the Bergman picture pointing to our experience of God's silence.

3. *Attitude and approach.* This topic covers a variety of things. First of all, I tried to assess the context in which I was speaking. I am professor at a seminary that is presently in the center of controversy. My hearers are a mixture of pastors, teachers and scholars, many of whom I have never met. My desire to say something important, even crucial, to the group dictated going in the direction of confronting our contemporary problems head on. On the other hand, I knew that what I would say could easily be misunderstood precisely because I would be saying it. This dictated my going the pastoral route. I sought to speak honestly, but without recrimination, and in such a way as to indicate my own struggles with the issue. My goal was therapeutic and didactic rather than propagandistic.

There was some strategy in arranging the sequence of the material. I felt that some of the group might not be able to identify with the silence of God as applied to a secular context and that some might get an impression of my engaging in polemics if I started with the Bible account. I hoped that if these two missed the retelling of the story would hit in some way. The Bible issue was taken second because it was bound to be of interest to most of the group. I offered the final section after much deliberation. I decided that there would probably be some men in the group who are really struggling in their ministries with the silence of God. The others can wait a few minutes for the brothers' sake. So I gave it a whirl.

4. *Delivery.* After all of this anguished rumination and careful planning of the manuscript, my own procedure is to get the stuff in my bones and throw the manuscript away. The only way I can really get totally involved with the issues and the persons is to let it fly eyeball to eyeball free of all attachment to the printed page. I try mentally to grab the hearer by the collar and say, "This is important. I've got good news for you."

PANIC OR PROMISE

One of my favorite sections out of William Auden's *A Christmas Oratorio: For the Time Being* is the temptation of Joseph. He is being jeered by a secular world to believe that Mary is immoral and the Christ Child is a bastard. The chorus says:

Maybe, maybe not.

But, Joseph, you know what

Your world, of course, will say

About you anyway.

And Joseph said:

Where are you, Father, where?
Caught in the jealous trap
Of an empty house I hear
As I sit alone in the dark
Everything, everything
The drop of the bathroom tap,
The creak of the sofa spring,
The wind in the air-shaft, all
Making the same remark
Stupidly, stupidly,
Over and over again.
Father, what have I done?
Answer me, Father, how
Can I answer the tactless wall
Or the pompous furniture now?
Answer them . . .

And Gabriel says:

No, you must.

And Joseph replies:

201 How then am I to know,
Father, that you are just?
Give me one reason.

Gabriel:

No.

Joseph:

All I ask is one
Important and elegant proof
That what my Love had done
Was really at your will
And that your will is Love.

Gabriel:

No, you must believe;
Be silent, and sit still.

We are saying there are times when God pushes us to the outer extremity and we are faced with a terrible choice, to panic or to hold to promise. The Lord pushed our father Abraham to the end of the tether. He no doubt was a prudent man,

yet he was pushed beyond prudence when he was impelled to leave his land and security and travel fifteen hundred miles to a promised land who knows where or when. No doubt he was a reasonable man, but he was pushed beyond reason when he as a toothless old man and his sagging, bagging wife were told they were to have a child at ninety. He was a moral man who dearly loved his son and sought to keep the will of God, but he was pushed beyond morality on this day when God calls him to take his dear, his only son and sacrifice him. It must have been hard to cross that frozen wasteland all those years. It must have even been harder to wait all that time for the promise to see some incarnational fulfillment. But what could be worse than to be asked by God to kill your own son?

There is something worse, believe it or not. For a man of faith, for a religious man there is really no argument; God is the center of all value. And each of us is valued only in that we continue our trust in Him and give Him glory. Thus if the good becomes the enemy of the better, the good must indeed in faith be sacrificed, be it God's will. For there is a center of our lives, and that is God, and He is one of promise, and He is good. No, the most terrible ordeal is when that God speaks a word that kills His own promise, or apparently does, when that good God comes down after having promised a way in which we would be blessed and the nations and says, "And now I want you to take that medium of promise and slay it." Abraham is pushed to the end of his tether, that is, beyond reason and beyond morality, beyond the very religion, if you will, the

very medium by which there is an eloquent proof that the promise is his.

"The Lord will provide." Surely we don't want to take that as a magical incantation that said, "He knew all along the scapegoat would be there." Surely when father Abraham lifted the knife, he meant it to spear his son in his chest. And even though the scapegoat was provided, we have that lament in the Book of Hebrews which says, "And they all died not having received what was promised." The only bit of the promised land Abraham has at the end is his burial cave; and Isaac will grow up and will die again. That great progeny will be led into exile and in the aftermath will be dispersed throughout the world, often to be decimated by the rest of humanity almost as the symbol of the suffering of all people in the face of judgment and the silence of God.

I am not suggesting that every moment of Abraham's life or ours is lived at this outer region. He had a full and happy life. I, for one, am, when all is said and done, not a glum mourner. What I am trying to suggest is that it is important for us to go the route with our father to see where it is that one hits the bottom and to see whether or not, having hit the bottom, there is something off of which even then one can bounce back, and return to give glory, to praise, and to love the world.

The prophets saw the promise threatened by the judgment of God with death and with silence. They began to speak of a greater and more radical intrusion of God into our world. They began to hope that He would come in a way unthought of before to set things straight and to bring about that eloquent proof whereby we would know that He was love to us. And

He came in His Son. Here too we are faced with the same dilemma. For the final word in His Son is that God Himself is to take Him to the tree and there judge Him on our behalf. The final word is that strange thing that out of an unknown family, in all the kings of Israel, some unknown family in some unknown city and some unknown child—that in Him and in His death, once again and in a way beyond comprehension, God says, "I am reliable, I accept you, I conquer the powers of the sin and death in your life. Trust Me."

As I was trying to think about what for this group might be the particular application that we might make, it struck me that there was a kind of analogy between Abraham being called out in the morning to take the medium of the promise and slay it and our call to service in the church in this time, when the Lord says, "Search the Scriptures," for they are the medium that holds the promise. We have done just that. We have left prudent vocations and studied Hebrew and Greek. We have gone out, and we have dedicated our lives to teaching. We have gone out, and we have discovered each in his own way a kind of panic about that project, the panic of taking the medium to the mount of dissection of historical criticism, if you will. The kind of panic that Paul Pallmeyer talked about yesterday when the issue was raised, "Well, why doesn't Concordia Publishing House publish some of this material?" and the answer was, "Some of the folks get so excited about the method that they don't see the message when they read it." And then I thought, "Of course, out of pastoral concern we must be patient and wait." Yet is that

panic not itself the message? We get so excited and panic in the face of the truth that shakes unsure foundations of faith. The Bible as God's medium of promise was taken to Moriah in order that we might be forced by our God to believe in the Promise alone. Do not misunderstand; I am not making an assault on Fundamentalists. I am talking about myself. It was as a student, who was himself wrapped up with the need for eloquent proof, that I came to this seminary and opened Rudolf Bultmann's *Primitive Christianity*. There for the first time I suddenly realized that all those things I thought were unique, totally unique; all those things I thought were kept apart and were the foundations of the eloquent proof by which I knew we were right and all the others were wrong — they began to crumble as proofs that make promise and faith unnecessary. Suddenly the corrosions and the acids of modernity began to take their toll, and I had to scramble for another place. Let me tell you something, a secret. I have managed by God's promise to keep on going, but I haven't solved the problems. I solved some and have created others. Our struggle as scholars and as teachers in this conference indicates we are all "on the way." And more and more I have, as I am sure you have too, learned to live with the thought that the next book and next generation and the next message will not be the eloquent proof that makes faith unnecessary either. What is left? Why, the Promise is left. There is a strange fulfillment in death and sacrifice, His death and His sacrifice, that speaks to me over and over again, "Trust Me, and do your work as a servant, as a lover, do your work in hope."

Of course, this problem with the Bible

is merely, it seems to me, a part of that hermeneutical shock, that shock that we all have had as we hit the modern times in a secular age. I sincerely believe that all of us are infected whether we know it or not by the secularism of our time for better and for worse. John Damm mentioned the other day that he interviewed twelve seniors who are about to go on call and dared to ask them the question: What was their family worship life going to be like in the parish? Almost to a man they had no plan. They did not groove in a "religious" style of piety and life signaled in formal family worship. What does this mean? Is that not somehow the signal that we have been infected, profoundly and unconsciously infected, by a secular atmosphere? Who can go through the critique of religion via Marx which reveals religion to be such a social construction designed to legitimate the *status quo* and not wonder whether or not we are all playing games with God talk. Can we avoid the awe of no longer being in a small world where we are the center, covered by a beautiful canopy? We are little specks in a vast universe, and who knows where it's going? If the words of our liturgy and if in our prayers we are "saying it more and enjoying it less," then we too may be experiencing the secular silence of God. Three wars, a depression, and a revolution all over the world — is it any wonder that we are saying, "God, if You are there, please speak. You who made a world so enigmatic, so unexplainable, so filled with suffering and terror, would You please speak so that I may know You are love and You are present?"

Ingmar Bergman in his film series is obsessed with the question of the presence of God in the world and the lack of ex-

perience that he and many had of that presence. In his film *Persona*, he employs an unusual device — (I am not sure this is what he means but let me tell you what I think he means by it) — an unusual device for dealing with this problem of God's silence. A nurse is asked to take care of an actress who does not speak. We do not know why the actress cannot speak. She was eloquent on the stage at one time. But she refuses to speak. The nurse is a modern woman, bright, technically efficient. Yet her life, as she tells it, is filled with sexual adventures and tribulations. In the course of the picture she desperately wants this mute patient to say something to her, and we hit a final climax towards the end of the film where the nurse in desperation says, "Try to listen. I beg you. Can't you hear what I am saying? Try to answer now." The actress lifts her face from her hands. It is naked, sweat-drenched, and then she nods slowly and speaks the only line she has in the entire film: "Nothing. Nothing. Nothing at all. Nothing. That is good. That is the way it had to be." In the epilog of the movie we are told that in December Elizabeth Vogler, the actress, went back to her home and to her theater and she was warmly welcomed in both. "Her silence was a role like all her others."

To be sure, this is an enigmatic picture. In the light of Abraham's ordeal with God, I find personal meaning in Bergman's symbol for a Silent God. On the one hand the silence is a terrible judgment on the nurse.

She is the modern woman in a demythed world, but the end result in her person and life is a trivial and lonely existence. The call for God to speak is a call for Him to prove He is still useful in a world determined by her. To this call God is silent, and His silence is the terrible judgment of confirming in her mind that God is dead. But there is another side to this silence. The fact that the actress is there in silence and says nothing is a good signal. Just so God speaks eloquently when His Son is silenced. He says to us, "You are free. I never made you to stay a child. I am here to remind you that your freedom is My gift to you. I am here with the promise that you will be a blessing. But you can't make Me give you this promise. You cannot take it by force. You can only trust Me. Trust Me even when I say nothing. Trust that when I silenced My Son, I graced the world."

My brothers, we are about to eat bread and drink wine together at the Lord's table. Here is the sign of promise. In eating and drinking we remember the Lord's death until He comes. We remember that God remembers us. What cause for caroling and celebration! In Him there is neither Jew nor Gentile. We are Abraham's family blessed and a blessing to the world. In the morning should you be faced with some awesome task, some bad signals, some strange silence, don't panic. Hold the promise.

St. Louis, Mo.