



**Seacliff Uniting Church**  
**Online Worship & Electronic Resources**  
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## **Pentecost 4**

### **CALL TO WORSHIP**

Let us lift up our hearts.

*We lift them to the Lord.*

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

*It is right to give our thanks and praise.*

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God,  
— trusting and rejoicing in your love —  
for you save us with a free gift of eternal life  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **HYMN: “PRAISE THE LORD, YOU HEAVENS ADORE HIM” (TIS 93)**

Praise the Lord: you heavens, adore him;  
praise him, angels in the height;  
sun and moon, rejoice before him;  
praise him, all you stars of light.  
Praise the Lord, for he has spoken;  
worlds his mighty voice obeyed:  
laws which never shall be broken  
for their guidance he has made.

Praise the Lord, for he is glorious;  
never shall his promise fail:  
God has made his saints victorious;  
sin and death shall not prevail.  
Praise the God of our salvation;  
hosts on high his power proclaim:  
heaven and earth and all creation,  
praise and glorify his name.

### **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND CONFESSION**

We come at this time to thank you and to praise you, trusting and rejoicing in your love,

You created all things  
and everything we have belongs to you.  
You commended your servant Abraham  
for his willingness to offer you his beloved son,  
and from his family you called a people to follow your ways.

In Jesus the Christ, you have offered to us your own beloved Son.

Whoever welcomes him welcomes you,  
and whoever welcomes the teaching he entrusted to us  
finds the way that leads to righteousness and life.  
When he was killed  
you brought him back from death to life,  
and through his grace,  
you have freed us from slavery to sin  
and bound us to Christ,  
so that we might be sanctified  
and follow him in pathways of life.

Therefore, with our hearts lifted high,  
we offer you thanks and praise at all times  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
Amen.

### **Prayers of Confession –**

As we draw near to you today, we do so in a spirit of humility, recognizing our own prideful, selfish nature, yet seeking to be your obedient servant. This is not easy for us, as our self-interests often tug us away causing us to fall short of what we know to be what you would have us do. Our frequent failures have been a reason why we have struggled so hard in the past.

We need your grace and mercy

We have nothing else to offer you except our good intentions. We know that you value us as we keep trying -- even when the end result is often failure.

Because your Holy Spirit moves so often in us at exactly the moment we surrender and obey, we try to be sensitive and respond to his "still small voice" -- even when we don't fully understand why.

Your ways are not our ways - and we acknowledge, Father, that we often fall short of understanding where you are taking us. We pray also, for a spirit of discernment to fall on us so we can fully understand what you would have us do.

We pray today for the grace we will need to do your will.  
Amen

### **BIBLE READINGS**

Genesis 22:1-14 & Hebrews 11:17-19

### **PRAYER**

May God's stillness and peace rest upon us.  
May God's presence fill all our living.  
May God's blessing flourish around us.  
Amen

## MESSAGE

Whenever we are setting out to learn something new or to embark on something for the first time, it can be helpful to have someone from whom we can learn; someone who has done something similar and from whose experience we can benefit. So it is in our journey of faith. We are not the first ones to walk this path and it can be valuable to look at the lives of those who have been this way before for guidance.

That is why it is good to look at the lives of our ancestors of faith in the pages of scripture. Over the next few weeks the set readings in the lectionary for the Hebrew Scriptures come from the book of Genesis. From this story we will meet, not every week but from time to time, some of our ancestors of faith. From their lives; their highs and lows, their successes and failures, their strengths and weaknesses, we will endeavour to learn something for our lives and faith.

Today we meet Abraham, and there can, perhaps, be no better place to start. He is known to Christians, Jews and Muslims as the ‘father of faith’. About three quarters of the world’s population trace their spiritual origins to this man. In the book of James in the New Testament he is called a ‘friend of God’. (2:23) The Apostle Paul implores us to “consider the experience of Abraham”. (Gal 3:6) So let us consider Abraham.

To remind ourselves let’s do a quick, “Abraham, this is your life” segment. We meet Abraham early in the book of Genesis where he is living in a Babylonian culture. With his father Terah and family he moves north to Haran. While there he heard the call of God to leave that place and set out on a journey on which Yahweh, God, promised to direct him. With that call went the promise that he would have a land to call his own, descendants who would be a great nation and a name that would go down in history. Abraham heeded the voice of God and set out on a journey which for him would never really end. He went first to Palestine, then to Egypt and then back to Palestine where he moved constantly until the son of promise, Isaac, was born. At the end of his life the only land he would have to call his own was a burial field.

That is an outline of the facts of his life, but the interesting thing is what he learnt during this time of journeying that is passed on to us.

**The first** thing I think Abraham learnt was that the security God offers us is dynamic and not static.

We’ve already seen that Abraham was constantly on the move. Instead of permanence, stability and something to hang on to, God called him to a great adventure. For Abraham there would be no settling down or becoming comfortable in one place. He would be forever on the move.

Perhaps Abraham desired, as we often do, that life could be more settled, more stable. How many times have we heard during the COVID pandemic that what we really desire is to ‘get back to normal’? Get back to the way things were. But for Abraham it would never be so. Change, movement and uncertainty would characterise the life he lived with this surprising God. Permanence in time and space would be the enemy of the life to which he was called. Ironically, it is often change, movement and uncertainty which we view as the enemy. Yet with this God, God works through change and movement rather than opposing it.

Abraham would learn, as can we, that his only real security was in knowing the presence of God wherever he was. Through all the changes of his life, Abraham needed to learn that whatever was happening around him God was with him.

*There is a parable about a flock of geese that enjoyed the security of their stability. They lived in a barnyard with high walls and good food. It was very secure. One day a philosopher goose came and spoke to them. He was very good and week after week they gathered to listen to him. He told them of another world; a world of infinite possibilities, of the wonders of flight and of the marvels that lay outside the secure walls. The geese loved to listen. They were inspired, uplifted and they discussed the ideas at length. But they stayed*

*in the barnyard. They never flew and they never saw another world, for the barnyard was secure and the food was good.*

Security found in stability can be deadening and to seek security in permanence can be folly. Our life with God is not like that. Rather our security lies in the knowledge of God's presence with us as we move in response to God's call and with God's promise. Our security is dynamic, not static.

**The second** lesson we can learn from Abraham is that perfection is not a prerequisite for God to work in and through anyone.

What we see here at the beginning of our faith story and which continues throughout our faith story, is significantly important. Namely, that God takes us where we are and moves us to where God wants us to be. Perfection or some particular standard is not required before God calls us.

This is seen so clearly in the narrative of Abraham's life. Sometimes I think we tend to see Biblical figures as models of perfection; plaster saints without flaw. But with Abraham, and so many others, this notion is shattered. They are presented to us, as we say, 'warts and all'. In Abraham we see someone whose life is littered with failure and whose character is marked with many foibles. We often see him motivated by self-interest or by fear. For example, in one part of his story we see Abraham, during a time of famine, journey down to Egypt in search of food. Because his wife Sarai, as Sarah was known at that time, was so beautiful, Abraham was afraid the Egyptians would kill him so they could have her. To prevent this he passed her off as his sister. So he was quite capable of faithlessness, manipulation and conniving; yet God worked with him, in him and through him.

We are not asked to be perfect, but we are asked to grow and God is patient with growing things. I hope this part of Abraham's story frees us and liberates us from any false expectations of ourselves and from being too hard on ourselves.

**The third** lesson I think we can learn from Abraham is perhaps the hardest, because it emerges from the reading we had this morning in Genesis 22, and any way we look at it, it is a difficult, puzzling and disturbing text.

To recap, Abraham had been called out of his homeland to go to a land God would show him. He was to go on the basis of the promise that God would give him a land, progeny from whom would come a great nation and a name that would live in history.

For a long time the desired child of promise failed to be born. At times Abraham, quite disastrously, tried to manipulate the fulfilment of that promise. However, eventually the child was born. But then, at the point where we enter the story today, Abraham is being tested and told to sacrifice this son. When he left his homeland, he was asked to sacrifice his past. Now he seems to be asked to sacrifice his future. It's a story with ethical problems; what do we make of a God who requires child sacrifice? It's a story with practical problems; what happens with the promise to Abraham if this child is sacrificed?

What are we to make of this story? What is its meaning? Old Testament theologian Gerhard von Rad reminds us that stories such as this seldom, if ever, have only one meaning. In this story there are several possible meanings or themes being conveyed. It could be a story that's to be understood as a rejection of child sacrifice. One Jewish interpretation is that it is a story that teaches us to value our children; a good point in a world where children are still often sacrificed to neglect, sexual abuse, poor education, violence or inadequate health care. Perhaps the story shows us that nothing is ours by right; that all life is a gift. Possibly it shows that sometimes we hear God wrongly and in this story God urgently stepped in to prevent the sacrifice of Isaac because Abraham had not heard God correctly. There is probably something in all of these.

But I want to reflect in this message on what this story may tell us about our images of God. On a surface reading the story of Abraham and Isaac presents us with an image of God who is capricious and at conflict with God's own self. God has promised this child as the future of the nation, and then God required this child to be sacrificed only to avert that action in the end.

We are told at the beginning of the story that God is testing Abraham. As readers we know this; we know what Abraham doesn't. The word 'test' gives us the clue that God had no intention of going through with the sacrifice. That God is not the unpredictable and changeable God that humanity often imagines God to be.

In reality, for most of human history and across just about all cultures, God has been perceived as scary and threatening. The sort of God who would make outrageous demands on people. The sort of God who would need to be placated by extreme offerings.

But this story tells us that God is not that sort of God. This story puts an end to that image. Rather God is the sort of God who is seen as humanity's provider and carer. In an age threatened by religious extremism and violence in the name of God we would do well to remember that.

The good news in Genesis 22 is that God does not require the sacrifice of Abraham's beloved son. God desires the child to live as a blessing and to be a hope for the future. There are many questions left unanswered at the end of the story but one thing it leaves with me is that I may not always understand the ways of this surprising God, I may have to go through testing times, but as I do I go with a God who is reliable in God's love.

## **OFFERING PRAYER**

Christ has invited us to be his disciples and graciously made us God's own children. Our giving is an expression of our gratitude to God for his loving welcome.

*Blessed are you, Lord God our Father;  
through your goodness we have these gifts to share.  
Accept and use our offerings for your glory  
and for the service of your kingdom.  
Amen.*

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

Most loving God, you have put it in our hearts to pray for one another.  
*Please hear our prayers, correct their errors, and bless all that is wise and loving.*

We pray for the vibrant and the strong, and all who are full of joy and high hopes today.  
*We pray for the fatigued and the weak, and all who are utterly weary and disheartened today.*

We pray for the wise and the generous, and those who are looking for new challenges today.  
*We pray for the foolish and the selfish, and those who are evading their responsibilities today.*

We pray for peace-keepers and peacemakers, and all who work for justice and peace today.  
*We pray for the hostile and the treacherous, and all who will resort to violence today.*

We pray for the well housed and well fed, and those who share their good fortune today.  
*We pray for the homeless and the hungry, and all whose plight is ignored today.*

We pray for the patient and the merciful, and all who will make new friends today.  
*We pray for the hasty and the judgmental, and all who will create some misery today.*

We pray for the healthy and the buoyant, and those who will share much happiness today.  
*We pray for the dying and the sad, and those who will weep inconsolably today.*

We pray for the faithful and the loving, and all who will worship with delight today.  
*We pray for the faithless and the cynical, and all who will find life a drag today.*

We pray for our loved ones and our friends, and those whom we will meet casually today.  
*We pray for strangers and enemies, and those who will think evil of us today.*

Loving God, please bring the day nearer when our prayers and our deeds will work in perfect harmony,  
*and we will be a blessing to all those whose lives touch ours. Through Christ Jesus our Saviour.*  
*Amen!*

## **SONG: "COME AS YOU ARE" (TIS 693)**

'Come as you are:  
that's how I want you.  
Come as you are;  
feel quite at home,  
close to my heart,  
loved and forgiven.  
Come as you are:  
why stand alone?

'No need to fear,  
love sets no limits;  
no need to fear,  
love never ends;  
don't run away  
shamed and disheartened,  
rest in my love,  
trust me again.

'I came to call sinners,  
not just the righteous;  
I came to bring peace,  
not to condemn.  
Each time you fail  
to live by my promise,  
why do you think  
I'd love you the less?

'Come as you are:  
that's how I love you;  
come as you are,  
trust me again.  
Nothing can change  
the love that I bear you;  
all will be well,  
just come as you are.'

## BLESSING

Go now to love and serve the Lord;  
encourage one another,  
uphold one another,  
bear one another's burdens,  
serve one another,  
and above all,  
love one another;  
in the power of the Spirit who makes us one.

## SUNG BLESSING: TIS 781

Father, bless us as we go,  
Jesus, walk beside us.  
Holy Spirit, guide us.

TIS 781 Father bless us as we go Words © R Mann  
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## FOR REFLECTION

- Was there anything that stood out for you in the readings, message or service today?
- How does the story of Genesis 22 sit with you? What do you make of it?
- In what way is Abraham the 'father of faith' for us?
- How does the security God offers differ from that offered by our culture?
- Do you find any encouragement in the thought that God doesn't require us to be perfect before God can work in and through us?

## QUOTES TO PONDER

In response to the many questions raised, and unanswered, by Genesis 22, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:  
*"Many answers have been offered over the generations, but one transcends all others: We cherish what we wait for and what we most risk losing. Life is full of wonders. The birth of a child is a miracle. Yet, precisely because these things are natural, we take them for granted, forgetting that nature has an architect and history an author.... Judaism is a sustained discipline in not taking life for granted."*

And I'm sure you know by now that I have to include a quote from Walter Brueggemann:  
*"The life of Abraham, then, is set by this text in the midst of the contradiction of the **testing** of God and the **providing** of God; between the sovereign freedom which requires complete obedience and the gracious faithfulness which gives good gifts; between command and promise; and between the word of death which takes away and the word of life which gives. The call of Abraham is a call to live in the presence of this God who moves both toward us and apart from us. Faithful people will be tempted to want only half of it. Most complacent religion will want a God who provides, not a God who tests. Some... will want a God who tests but refuses to provide. Some... will regard both affirmations as silly... Abraham confessed himself not free from testing and not competent for his own provision."*