

As we navigate our spiritual journey, our minds continually turn to a very perplexing issue, namely, the nature of God. Who is God? Why does God seem to disappear at times? Can we trust God? Does God really love us? Is God mad at me? What do I have to do to get God's attention? You're not alone in these questions. As soon as we think we have God figured out, well, you know the end of that statement.

All three of the great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, trace their ancient origins to the hero of our first reading today, Abraham. Although we have virtually no archeological evidence that places Abraham firmly into the historical record, the great Tradition places him in the middle East about 3,800 years ago. The high honors granted Abraham all speak of his *faith*, and today's story is the touchstone of that tradition. God tests Abraham's faith through one of the most horrific commands ever given a human being, "Take your beloved son, Isaac, and slaughter him on a mountain I will show you." Even though I've read this story hundreds of times, it still makes me shudder. Like me, you may wonder. Did God really give that command? Did Abraham misunderstand? What did poor Isaac think of all of this? And finally, if this is what your god wants, Abraham, then I think I'll find another god, thanks.

There are dozens of commentaries about this passage. Some of them take the story quite literally and do not excuse God's actions in the least. God wanted to test Abraham and He does so in the most excruciating way possible. Others put the onus on Abraham's *interpretation* of what he *thinks* God wants. Understand that other pagan gods of the time made similar demands of human sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of a first-born son or daughter. Abraham, by this interpretation, was simply doing what his neighbors routinely did – painful, but not terribly unusual. I tend to lean toward this second interpretation, mostly to preserve God's reputation in my mind. But both interpretations miss the key point of the story, the reason why the Church Fathers tie this episode to our gospel reading today, the transfiguration of Jesus.

Abraham's "test" ends at the moment of death for poor Isaac when an angel calls on Abraham, knife raised high, to stop! Abraham does so, of course, and we can be certain that his overwhelming emotion is surprise and relief. At a very dark hour, God has shown God's true self – a lover of life in abundance. Note the parallels to today's Gospel reading. Peter, James, and John are all struggling with their faith in Jesus. Jesus has just told them that

his mission includes death at the hands of the religious authorities, a prospect that Peter cannot accept. Jesus rebukes Peter for thinking as human beings do, not as God does, and five verses later, we're at the top of a mountain. Surprise! Jesus is transfigured, his human and divine selves switching places, so to speak, and the power of that vision is so profound that Peter no longer attempts to sway Jesus from his mission. From sadness and despair to surprise and relief, once again God does the unexpected.

Does God continue to surprise us? In August, 2015, 91 year-old former president Jimmy Carter was diagnosed with metastatic melanoma, a severe form of skin cancer that had spread to his brain. Convinced he only had weeks to live, he began to put his affairs in order, and all over the world, tributes began to flow in celebration of the remarkable life of service this man had lived. But God had other ideas. Shortly after the diagnosis, Carter was treated with a new immunotherapy drug that had been approved by the FDA in 2014. Four months later, brain scans found no sign of cancer, and the treatment was ended. Surprise! Carter is now 93 years old and still going strong, still working for peace in a struggling world. He has a new book coming out next month, just before Easter. Would you be surprised to hear what the title is? Yeah, it's called *Faith*.

Lent is a journey of faith. That's the entire point of the season. It originated in the early Church as a period of fasting and preparation for those preparing to enter the Church on Easter Vigil. Before long, the Church saw the wisdom of enlisting all of us baptized into the same journey of discernment, because we need to relearn ourselves to think as God does, not as human beings do. We need to relearn the art of being *surprised*.

Think of the darkest part of your life right now. Maybe it's a deep regret. Perhaps a lost opportunity. Maybe it's a broken relationship or a person you hold in unforgiveness. It may be a terrible diagnosis for you or a loved one. It may be for a person lost in addiction or mental illness. It may be a problem that you haven't found a solution for. You've tried everything humanly possible to deal with this situation, and you're at wit's end. Now, my friends, is the time for faith. God wants to surprise you. Jesus was three days in the tomb, his followers devastated and afraid. Surprise! Resurrection. We tend to think that God's intervention is rare and unusual. It isn't at all. The Church has a phrase for it, in fact. It's called the paschal mystery. Look back on your life – you will see a pattern emerging. Life proceeds in a stable way, then some disaster strikes. We are rocked and

saddened, certain that things will never be the same again. Then, surprisingly, unexpectedly, without any discernible reason, we bounce off the bottom and begin to rise again. It may be an encouraging word, or a new medication, or an apology we don't expect. It may be a loved one stepping in with a solution that really works. Regardless, we see better times ahead. But do we credit God for the rise? If you're like me, probably not.

Some of our venerable saints were so well versed in the paschal mystery that they deliberately put themselves in harm's way, convinced that God would surprise them in new and special ways. The prospect of another resurrection moment to savor was irresistible. I'm not advocating that, by the way. I've found that trouble comes on its own without us needing to go find it! But there is a pearl of wisdom here just the same. Seeing life's challenges as gateways to God's healing power is a wonderful life view, a marvelous spiritual optimism. St. Paul expresses it in a beautifully simple way in the second reading, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

So, as you continue to try to figure out who God is, please don't settle for any one description or explanation. You are thinking as human beings do. Instead, expect to be surprised. Look for the surprise, especially in the darkest hour. Look for the angel to arrive on the scene. Look for God to show up in disguise – you'll know Him by the light and love he brings. You can't disguise that!