

JJ<sup>1</sup>

If you've ever started a diet, you've probably done something similar to what so many people did this last Tuesday. The Tuesday before Lent begins, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, is called Fat Tuesday. Many use it as a time to indulge their passions and appetites before giving those things up for Lent. Who here hasn't done much the same thing before beginning a diet and indulged in a donut or greasy burger and fries?

People talk about giving things up for Lent. Maybe you've even given things up for Lent in the past, or are this year. More often than not, it's the easy stuff people give up. More often than not, it's a feather-in-the-cap, brag-around-the-bubbler kind of thing. This kind of giving up misses the point of Lent. What Lent asks of us is far more difficult. It echoes throughout our readings today. In the Gospel, Jesus calls us to repentance (Mk. 1:12-15). In our second lesson, Paul reminds us that sorrow filled repentance is a joy when we know what God's response to it will be (Rom. 8:31-39). Since repentance is the major theme of Lent, you could say that the question Lent asks is this: "What do I love most? God? Or something else?" Today we focus this question on our own hearts as we talk about the real, difficult, and life-long lesson of **GIVING UP FOR LOVE**.

Before us today we have one of the most dramatic accounts in all of Scripture. From the first time we hear this account, we remember it the rest of our lives. Every time we hear it, we are simply amazed—a father is told to give up his son, his only son!

Some years before this, Abraham already said goodbye to another son, Ishmael. He was the son he had with Sarah's maidservant, Hagar. Abraham had to send them away because Ishmael was persecuting Isaac for being the son of The Promise (cf. Gal. 4:29). Then God comes and says, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains there, the one to which I direct you."

The silence from Abraham is startling! There is no complaint, "LORD, how could you tell me to kill my son? Aren't I supposed to do everything in my power to protect him?" There're no arguing, "LORD, what's wrong with you? How could you have me do this when Isaac is the child of The Promise?" Not a word, even though the sacrifice the LORD told him to make would have left nothing of Isaac but dust and ashes!

Abraham's obedience and love for God is so great, he wakes up early the next

<sup>1</sup> JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

morning to get ready and leave. Abraham, Isaac and two servants set out for the 50 mile, 3 day journey through the hill country of what would one day be the land of the tribe of Judah. Just imagine all that time he had to think about what he was doing! Every step was a fruit of faith! Then Abraham sees the mountains of Moriah in the distance, and Moses relays every gut-wrenching detail. "Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and loaded it on Isaac his son. He took the firepot and the knife in his hand." Isaac carries the fuel that would consume him, and his father carries the fire and knife that would bring an end to Isaac's earthly life and destroy his physical body!

As Abraham and Isaac travel up the mountain, Isaac breaks the heavy silence with a question. This question must have felt as though the knife Abraham was carrying just plunged into his own heart! "My father. Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Where we would have crumpled from grief, Abraham says, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

They reach the summit, Abraham builds the altar, distributes the wood on the altar, and then turns to his son. Isaac

doesn't fight or resist as his father binds his hands and feet and lays him on top of the wood. Notice again the stunning silence! This time from Isaac who doesn't plead with his father to stop as he reaches for the knife. When suddenly from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."



Why would God do this to Abraham? God was testing Abraham. Every test the LORD brings, he brings to strengthen faith, but perhaps the LORD had a second purpose. Look at the way in which the LORD describes Isaac, "your son, your only son, whom you love." Maybe God needed to bring this test because Abraham was beginning to love his son too much. "Too much?!" you ask. We can love

anything or anyone too much if it replaces God in our hearts for the number one spot. Perhaps Abraham was in danger of letting his love for Isaac crowd out his love for God. Abraham was called to **GIVE UP FOR LOVE**, love for God.

But what about you? What are some of the things you have given up in your life? And those things you've given up,

were they given up for a love of God, or a love of self? With an honest examination, most of the things given up are probably the easy things and given up for the love of self. Now, don't get me wrong, giving up something like sugar when your tongue, gut, and brain are addicted to it is a difficult thing, but it's not impossible. Yet, whether it's a New Year's resolution, diet or giving up for Lent, we pick the easy things.

Not one of you can sit there with any pride or security because each one of you can find things in your hearts and lives that you hold for yourself, telling God to keep his hands off. Maybe it's a person, or a pet sin. Maybe it's your money. Maybe it's your evenings or weekends. How about you do something real. Do something hard. Do something that is impossible for you to do apart from God. How about you let God have your whole heart.

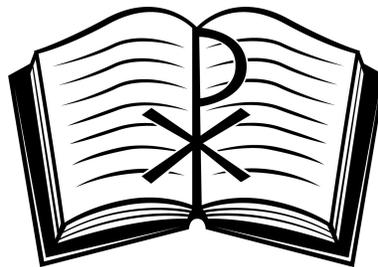
How about you simply trust God, instead of wringing your hands in worry. How about you live in patience, instead of getting upset that things aren't going just how you'd prefer. How about you rejoice in every opportunity to bring the gospel to people, instead of complaining that it might take up a little bit more of your precious time. How about you see your life for what it really is—a gift from God. Your life isn't about what you want to do

with it or making sure you "have a life." Your life is about embracing what God has given to you at this time and place, and seeing your life in what God wants from it.

You want to see how much you struggle in **GIVING UP FOR LOVE**? Then just take a few moments right now, close your eyes and make a mental list of all things things you wouldn't want to live without. Now, find the things in that list that, if gone or taken away, would make you want to quit life, would make you want to just be done with it all. With the exception of God's Word, every one of those things left on your list is in danger of becoming your idol, if it hasn't already.

Maybe you can find times in your life where God tested you with those things on your list, just like Abraham. A lot of opportunities came in Abraham's long life before the one he faced today to give up for the love of God. And several of those times he failed miserably. But finally Abraham learned to **GIVE UP FOR LOVE**—to simply trust God and put everything in the hands of Him who made The Promise.

After passing the test, the LORD again assures Abraham of his promise: "In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed..." That offspring is Christ our Savior. In fact, he was the very one speaking to Abraham! And friends, look



at what Christ gave up out of love for you! His struggle against temptation in the wilderness was so great, angels came and attended him! And yet, he was victorious in his struggle. And then one day, Jesus would willingly obey his Father's will and carry the wood of his altar on his own back to that same mountain where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac. There the Father did not spare his own Son one bit of suffering. There Jesus endured the ultimate struggle against sin. It killed him, but he rose again, just as he promised! How beautifully and most excellently Abraham's words were fulfilled in Christ's death and resurrection. "The LORD will provide."

Friends, that's why Abraham could struggle as he did. He knew and believed The Promise. You see this in his complete obedience. You see it when you hear him tell the servants, "We will worship and then *we* will come back to you." And when he tells his son, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burn offering..." Not only did God provide the ram for their sacrifice that day. God provided *The Lamb* of sacrifice, His Son, His Only Son, who would give his life on that very mountain!

Friends, part of being a child of God is to be willing to **GIVE UP FOR LOVE** of God. It's not our place to ask why, but to trust

God to give what is good. Because that is exactly what he does give. The Apostle Paul makes that point crystal clear. As we repentantly turn to God and trust in him above all things, we have absolute assurances from him. Paul writes: "If God is for us, who can be against us? Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?" (Rom. 8:31-32) And again, there is nothing in all creation that is "able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

Friends, this is why, like Abraham, we can quietly and confidently follow our Father's plan. And friends, when you fail to give things up for love of God, and you will, even daily, then repent and receive from your Father the forgiveness and the strength he won by truly giving up everything for love of you! Amen.

SDG<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.

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