Feb 28 - March 1, 2015
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

The movie shows a soldier instinctively jumping on a hand grenade thrown into a foxhole, absorbing the blast and saving his comrades. A poker player surveys the cards on the table, and the subtle “tells” of the other players around the table, takes a deep breath, and pushes her entire pile of chips into the center of the table, betting it all on a single turn of the cards. A basketball player whose team is in a double overtime heaves a mid-court shot toward the basket as time expires, and wins the VCU University of Richmond game. These, and others like them, are times when one goes all out, jumps without a safety net, risks it all in service of the greater goal. These are the moments when our hearts are in our throats, the moments that will shape our lives, when we make a bold decision without the luxury of knowing whether we will end up the hero of the goat, the victor or the vanquished.

We go for the brass ring… no second chances, no back-up plans, nothing spared.

Most of our lives are spent calculating and avoiding risks, playing it safe, betting on the statistical winner. It is not natural to jump out of a perfectly safe airplane, and dare to jump into thin air 10,000 feet above ground, even with a parachute strapped to one’s back. For that matter, it is not statistically safe to risk getting married when so many marriages end in divorce or boredom, …or to have children when the world is so full of danger and uncertainty. So why do people do it? Why take the risk? Why not play it safe by refusing to play at all?

There is nothing wrong with appropriate caution or careful planning. But the ultimate goal of life is not to get to the end without taking any risk; it is to get to the end having made the right choices, including the few brave and courageous risky choices that had to made without the assurance of success, journeys taken “without a spare” in pursuit of a higher goal. Perhaps we have not truly lived until we live through one of these moments—but truth be known, we sure could not bear having very many of them either.

Our scripture today tell of just such moments. From the book of Genesis, Abraham takes his son, Isaac, his precious only child, up a mountain believing God has asked him to sacrifice him. Remember that Abraham was pushing 100 years old before he fathered Isaac. The promises of God, that he and Sarah would have a family “more numerous than the stars of the sky”, had grown so dusty and old that it was laughable when they miraculously conceived Isaac VERY late in their 90’s. Can you imagine, at that age, trying to get Medicare to pay for maternity bills, or taking your infant to AARP meetings? It was ridiculously late, and wonderfully surprising, how God showed up to fulfill His promise to Abraham and Sarah, far after they had stopped hoping for a child of their own. But then, after all that waiting, can you imagine God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, to give him up? What kind of command was that?! How unimaginable?! And not the least of which, because no thinking person could believe Abraham and Sarah would be able to have another child, a decade later than the miracle birth of Isaac? Talk about an obedience without a safety net, or a back-up plan!

Let us be quick to admit here that there is much in this mysterious passage of scripture that rightly puzzles us, and bothers us. Nowhere else in scripture does God seem to condone or require child sacrifice. In fact, the prohibition of human sacrifice was one of the distinct features that distinguished Israel’s understanding of God from the religions of their pagan neighbors. Although we know that God stopped Abraham before he took Isaac’s life, the story is told in Genesis in such a way that Abraham’s faith is affirmed, that he would be willing to do the unthinkable, to kill his own son, if he thought God had asked him to do it. So this is meant to be a story of great faith, the faithful obedience of Abraham to do whatever God asked, no matter the cost, no matter how illogical, sparing nothing, not even his own beloved son. The story does not explore the other questions we want to ask, such as, “What effect must
this experience have had on poor Isaac?” Or, “Did Abraham really understand God correctly?” As much as these questions deserve conversation and interpretation, it is still a story of incredible faith and by a man whose faith in God was his most precious priority, more precious even than his beloved son.

Notice in the New Testament scriptures, this mysterious plotline is turned upside down. In the Gospel, Jesus is transfigured between Moses and Elijah, the two great champions of Israel’s faith. The heavenly voice affirms Jesus as God’s beloved son. It is truly a mountaintop moment for Jesus. But what is it that this experience affirms? Notice that this experience of transfiguration comes immediately after Jesus plainly told the disciples for the first time that his purpose and mission in life was to lay his life down in sacrificial and redeeming love for all humankind on a cross. This was his path of obedience to his heavenly Father. It was a path that was leading to a cross, of self-sacrifice in the name of love. In effect, God was taking upon Himself the very unimaginable decision that Abraham had contemplated, but this time there would be no sparing of God’s beloved and only Son. On this mountain there would be no ram caught in the thicket to replace Jesus as the sacrifice. God would actually give up His only son, sparing nothing, going “all in” in the “all out” divine plan to redeem humanity. As our Epistle lesson from the letter of Saint Paul to the Roman church said it, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

Abraham believed God had tested him on that mountaintop moment with his beloved son, Isaac, wanting him to be willing to spare nothing, no matter how precious and beloved, for the sake of obedience and faith in God’s plan. As the scriptures rightly point out, it was an incredible act of a human’s faith in God. But on the cross, on that mountaintop of Golgotha outside Jerusalem, God actually gave up His beloved only Son for the sake of love. And in a way, God’s sacrifice was also an act of audacious faith too—faith in us. For after raising Jesus from the dead, God left the work of the Kingdom in the hands and hearts of the Church, you and me, to finish. Talk about audacious faith! We usually think of our faith in God, but how amazing is it to ponder the divine faith of God in us, to finish what He set in motion through the sacrifice of His beloved Son!

As we journey toward Holy Week and the cross of Christ that looms ever closer during these 40 days, let us ponder in amazement a God who loves us so much that He would pay any price, sparing nothing, for our redemption—a God who would rather spread his arms and die on a cross that stop loving us.

If the reality of that gift doesn’t humble you, then perhaps you might want to read these scriptures again… and come to this altar ready to be nourished by the gift that trumps all gifts!