

Ordinary Mystery: “For Iris Dement”—B.J. Parker

Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 13; Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

As Judy said, welcome on this fourth Sunday in the Season after Pentecost, which is also called Ordinary Time. I’d like to discuss our texts today by way of first thinking about the season we’re in. Courtney and I both grew up in traditions that didn’t really pay attention to the liturgical calendar. When we moved from Georgia to Texas for graduate school that started to change. We joined a church community that understood itself, really, by way of the movements of the church calendar. Since then, in early 2010, I’ve slowly started learning what that means and have started trying to live into that. And to be frank, since I’ve started orienting my own life around the rhythms of the church, I’ve usually thought of Ordinary Time as sort of the desert wasteland of year. Nothing happens except the doldrums of summer—and you can guess what that was like in Waco, TX!

For a few minutes this morning, though, I’d like us to consider something different. I’d like us to consider Ordinary Time as one of the great gifts of the church calendar. Eugene Kennedy calls the season “our time,” and I think he’s right.

I’ll be honest. I love the theological, emotional, and seasonal movement that happens between Christ the King Sunday in November and the season of Easter. There are moments during this stretch of the year where anticipation and hope lead me to the thin places of life—those places and moments where you honestly think that you might be able to just reach over and touch the great Otherness of God. In these moments, I have deep hope that feels like it physically permeates me and literally animates me. In Advent and Christmas we hope for and see deity incarnate. Does that sound strange to anyone? I think it should. We’re literally talking about an unknowable, transcendent, ubiquitous being yoking itself to human form—but somehow still maintaining all the god stuff. In Lent we get time to reflect on life and God’s call to life. And then in Easter, well, we get the defeat of the nemesis of humanity—death. As church talk this all sounds fine and inspiring. But if we think about it as real, this stuff is really pretty crazy. And we believe it and that’s why it gives us hope and animates us.

These are definitely heady moments in the church calendar. But how many days do you wake up and feel doubt well up within you? Or how many days do you just forget about your faith? How many days do you roll out of bed, make your coffee, eat your cereal, go to work, deal with coworkers, make a deal, finish things up, go to the gym, barely get home for dinner, put the kids to bed, and then crawl right back into bed? And then how many days in a row do you do **that** cycle? We do have really poignant moments throughout the year—and maybe even a month or a week—where things feel almost transcendent. But the majority of our days, well, they **aren’t** like that. The majority of our days are just normal, they’re ordinary. This normalcy doesn’t deny heady visions of hope, but is founded on it. We experience ordinariness because we live within God’s good world. We doubt God’s providential care because we stand in some sort of relationship to God. This is the gift of Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time recognizes the majority of our life is routine. Or for those of you who have watched the show *Westworld*, the majority of our life is really just a little loop full of some good moments, but also a fair share of hurt and

doubt. Not only does Ordinary Time acknowledge this, but it celebrates it. Ordinary Time gives us space to just be—whatever that looks like for you. And it can do this because the seasons rests on mystery that we see the rest of year.

I think the collection of texts that the lectionary offers us today carries us into this way of being. When Judy asks one of us to preach, we often get weeks or months of notice and so we have plenty of time to mull over a text and listen to what the Spirit might be saying. Well, I've been mulling over the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 for the last few weeks, yeah, but also for a lot longer than that. Over the last few weeks specifically, I've been thinking about what this text along with our other ones for today mean to St. Paul's, to us, the people in this room. And you know what? I don't really know, but I have an idea. To be honest, I still can't get my head around this text. I've read Wenham, and Westermann, and Brueggemann, and Rabbi Telushkin, and Kierkegaard, and Kant, and I still bristle. I like Telushkin's comparison between Christianity and Judaism. He says that Christianity's fundamental orientation is "God was willing to sacrifice his son Jesus for God's love of humankind" while Judaism's fundamental orientation is "Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son for the sake of God." I also like Brueggemann's reading of the text that emphasizes God's providential care while acknowledging God's hiddenness.

When I read this text I have a lot of questions. Here are a few. First, does God really do this sort of thing in real life or just in stories in the Bible? If so, how do we know it's God speaking? Next, after all the family drama, why doesn't Abe talk with Sarah? I think the answer probably has something to do with Abe's propensity for dishonesty, like when he tried to pass Sarai off as his sister instead of his wife—twice. I wonder about the silence in these fourteen compact verses. The only female in the story, Sarah, is forced into silence by what sure seems like duplicity. The onlookers, Abraham's servants, are silent. The powerless, Isaac, is forced into silence by the powerful. To push a little further, what happens when an angel doesn't appear and a ram doesn't come out of the bush? You miscarry, you lose your job, you can't get a job, you divorce, or your partner dies? And in the midst of this, God remains hidden?

In the midst of these questions, I also feel a strong sense of awe. 22:1-2 and 12:1-3 form one of the most poignant inclusions (or literary brackets) in scripture, with YHWH's covenant with Abraham in chapters 15 and 17 set at the center. I can see woven throughout the narrative the theological intent to display the faith of Abraham as well as YHWH's providential care. My questions remain and my awe remains and neither will be silenced.

One of our other readings for this morning helps show us how to handle this sort of tension. In six short verses, Psalm 13 gives us a masterclass on the life of faith. Listen to the first verse: *How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?* The notion of God hiding God's face or the hiddenness of God occurs throughout the Old Testament. In the prophets and the few other places it occurs, the cause of God's absence is almost **always** sin of the people. In the Psalms, though, that's not the case. When the psalmist laments God's absence in the Psalms, the cause is opaque and is certainly not sin. So in verse 1, the psalmist pleads with an absent God to show up and change things. To be truer to the text, I should say the psalmist **expects** an absent God to show up and is confused why it hasn't happened yet. The

psalmist continues to question God in vv. 2-4, even indicating that if God doesn't show up, death is imminent.

The tone changes, though, in vv. 5-6. The author cries out that he has trusted God and that God has dealt bountifully with him in the past. The psalmist anticipates rejoicing and singing. And then the psalm ends. Did you notice anything odd about the psalm? The distress hasn't gone away. God still seems to be absent. The psalmist is still on the verge of death. The psalmist rejoices, and then the poem ends. There's no resolution in the poem, but there is lament and praise joined together—fear and trust molded into one life.

I think that what we see in Psalm 13 can help orient us to Genesis 22, albeit probably in a way that's a bit different from what I think Thomas Cranmer imagined. I don't think Psalm 13 so much reflects the thoughts of Isaac or Abraham as much as it teaches us how to approach an active life of faith. Psalm 13 and Genesis 22 invite us into a life of faith that's founded in mystery and where the most inexplicable things happen. We live, like the psalmist and Abraham, in full expectation of the God's ongoing providential care. We have the same hope of deliverance that the psalmist does when he remembers YHWH's past deeds and expects similar actions in the future. We have the same hope that presumably propels Abraham. That hope is what Walter Brueggemann calls God's long view of history and God's unfailing providential care. We also live, as the Psalmist does, with a God who is sometimes absent. Sometimes God doesn't show up. Innocent young black men **are** shot, police officers **are** targeted and killed, leaders around us **do** make bad decisions. And sometimes **we** stand silently like the characters in Genesis 22 or God in Psalm 13 as tragedies unfold.

And this is why I think Ordinary Time is such a gift to us. Ordinary Time invites us into the routine of life that often leads us to these questions. Singing Advent hymns and knowing that the incarnation is only a few weeks away makes faith feel certain and easy. During Lent we can evaluate how we have lost our way in finding the shalom that God offers us because the resurrection is near. And during Easter, the world can seem set aright. These are beautiful moments, but they're few. And our days are often similar—filled with moments of transcendence where we get it, where we understand. But more often than not, they're filled with questions and mystery, or arguments, or just chores. And that's ok. During Ordinary Time we not only recognize this, but we celebrate it. Ordinary Time and our texts for today offer us entry into not only the exhilarating highs of our faith but also into every other day of our faith. May we have the peace and courage to live there.