**The Wisdom of God’s Love**

**Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16**The Story of Isaac

**Matthew 21:23-32**

**I have to confess that today’s sermon may be more of a collage than it is your more typical sermon. Rather than a dominant image, with a unified theme, you are instead offered up this multitude of images, all quite different. We have this children’s story about people in windowless houses, Andy’s Leonard Cohen Song about Abraham and Isaac, the Psalms with its parting the Red Sea reminder and then Jesus confronting religious leaders in the temple. Maybe there is a common theme in there. We will see how it goes. But, it just may be that it remains a collage and you will have to make sense of it yourself.**

**It’s not altogether my fault. The Faith Life Ministry is partially responsible. Last year they decided that once a month we should include a Children’s Story in worship. This is the last Sunday of the month and I hadn’t gotten one in yet, so I went searching and found this story about God In Between that Rebecca read earlier. If today’s sermon doesn’t make any sense, you could blame Faith Life. I will be happy to remind you of who they are.**

**You might also point a finger at Eric Jacobsen and Andy Barnett. For the past few weeks, Eric Jacobsen has been leading the Adult Forum in a discussion of the poetry and music of Leonard Cohen. Andy Barnett had this piece by Leonard Cohen, called The Story of Isaac and Andy said, if it could be used some Sunday, he would like to sing it. I enjoy Andy’s singing. I also try to be an agreeable person, so, of course, I said yes. Feel free to blame Andy or maybe Eric if this sermon doesn’t make any sense.**

**I will admit to being partially responsible for this collage of images. Although, we typically share Scripture from the lectionary, assigned readings for the year, I could have chosen a simple passage that didn’t create yet another picture to put before us. But, instead I went with the Psalms and its vivid reminder of God parting the water so the Israelites might escape from slavery, leading them in the wilderness. If that weren’t enough, I also included this lectionary Gospel reading where Jesus gets into a confrontation in the temple about the source of his authority to do the things he is doing. If none of this comes together, and it remains just a confusing collage, it is O.K. with me if you blame Andy, Eric or Faith Life.**

**There is one thing in this collage of images that I did notice seems to keep popping up. You probably noticed it as well. It may not be anything that helps us find a unifying theme from this somewhat confusing collage, but on the other hand it is probably worthy of consideration. In each of the images we encounter human beings who are stuck, because they are unable to imagine their lives and their world any differently than it is.**

**In our Children’s story you have this whole community of people living without windows and without roads. They have been living this way for a long time. Without roads, they have to stomp through tall grass and weeds just to get around. During ragweed season, when the pollen is high, like it is here in the fall, you can hear people sniffling and sneezing for miles around. Without windows, they sleep till noon and beyond because they have no idea the sun has come up. Once and awhile someone suggests doing something about it, but you know as well as I do, the response they get, “this is the way it has always been done.” I am sure you have heard that before. You may have said it yourself. They are stuck in this windowless, roadless world unable to see the life that is possible.**

**In the Story of Isaac we are reminded of how stuck Abraham is when his certainty about what God expects leads him to believe he must kill his son Isaac. In his song about Abraham and Isaac, Leonard Cohen’s leads us into the uncomfortable awareness that it is this same certainty which can cause us to sacrifice friendships, relationships, and still today make the killing of children acceptable. Abraham is stuck, with the life of his child in the balance, certain he knows what God wants.**

**The Psalmist calls upon the people of Israel to remember how the certainties of their Egyptian slave masters had led to their own destruction. The Psalmist is cautioning the people of Israel, as we are cautioned as well, about preferring our own certainties to this unfolding journey God would have us travel. The Egyptians were stuck, the Israelites were stuck, we become stuck unable to recognize the possibilities God has for us.**

**Our Gospel lesson this morning is preceded by Jesus cleansing the temple, which as you know, is much more than getting out the dust rags, removing a few cob webs or even the type of Fall and Spring cleaning we do around here. Jesus is symbolically cleaning out the temple of those things which stand in the way of people fully experiencing the love and justice of God. One can only imagine what Jesus might wish to remove if he were physically present in some of our churches today.**

**The religious leaders want to know who gives Jesus the authority to do these things. Who gives you the authority to cleanse the temple? As Jesus, often does, he turns the tables on these religious leaders and tells them a story about two sons, one who says, “Sure father, I will do what you ask”. But instead plunks down in front of the TV and watches the Vikings. The other son says to his father, “Nope. Sorry. Too busy.” But, then the second son has a change of heart and does what his dad asked?” Jesus wants to know who is doing what his father desired?” It is the type of question that reminds us how stuck we get when our misplaced loyalties and the things we are certain about stand in conflict with the love and justice of God.**

**Life sometimes feels a lot easier and a lot less complicated when we can stick with what we believe we know for sure. That’s what the people in the windowless, roadless community were doing. Sticking with what they believed is what the Egyptians did as they chased the Israelites all the way to their own destruction. It is what Abraham is doing as he prepares to kill his son, believing this is the will of God. Guarding and maintaining their certainties is what the religious leaders are doing who question the authority of Jesus.**

**It is quite a collage we are given here this morning. In many ways it resembles the collage and the sometime confusing jumble of our own lives. But if our desires for answers, certainties and the comfort of the ways things are is a thread running through these various images and stories, than perhaps we can detect another thread as well.**

**What do we do when we find ourselves in a windowless house, or roadless community with no clear path from place to place? The people in the story we were given discovered the wisdom of God’s love was among them. Right there where they were.**

**What do we do when like the people of Israel we are uncertain about the future, wanting to hold onto whatever permanence we can grasp? The Psalmist calls upon us to listen, remember the wisdom of God’s love Who has been with us in the past and is with us still.**

**What do we do when like Abraham it feels our beliefs are so crucial that we will sacrifice our children and those we love on the altar of our certainties? The wisdom of God’s love calls us to put down the knife and trust God will provide.**

**What do we do when like the religious authorities we are tempted to keep Jesus from cleaning house of everything standing in the way of God’s love and justice? The wisdom of God’s love invites us to pick up our broom and join Jesus on cleaning day.**

**It is a messy collage that we are given today, and if none of this makes any sense, well you know who to blame. Yet it is precisely amidst the messiness of our lives where the wisdom of God’s love still dwells.**

**Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16**

***In our first lesson the Psalmist offers words of wisdom to the people of Israel. As so often is the case the people are anxious and fearful about the future. The Psalmist reminds them how God has been with them in the past, setting ancestors free from slavery in Egypt and journey with them in the wilderness. This same God will be with them now.***

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of God, we will tell of God's might, and the wonders that God has done. In the sight of their ancestors God worked marvels in the land of Egypt, in the fields of Zoan. God divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. In the daytime God led them with a cloud, and all night long  with a fiery light. God split rocks open in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly  as from the deep. God made streams come out  of the rock, and caused waters to flow down   
 like rivers.

**The Story of Isaac** by Leonard Cohen

*For our second lesson this morning, Andy Barnett will sing a song called “The Story of Isaac” by Leonard Cohen. In this song Cohen retells the story of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac, certain that this is what God wants Abraham to do. The story is told from the perspective of Isaac who understands that we continue to sacrifice children on the altars of our certainties.*

**Matthew 21:23-32**

***Our Gospel lesson today comes on the heels of Jesus just having cleansed the temple by overturning tables and chasing the money changers out into the street. The religious leaders are upset and demand Jesus tell them by what authority he does what he does? Not surprisingly, Jesus responds with a question and story of his own.***

When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin', we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.

**God In Between - Need – God is in the inbetween**

**The Story of Isaac**

The door it opened slowly,   
My father he came in,   
I was nine years old.   
And he stood so tall above me,   
His blue eyes they were shining   
And his voice was very cold.   
He said, "I've had a vision   
And you know I'm strong and holy,   
I must do what I've been told."   
So he started up the mountain,   
I was running, he was walking,   
And his axe was made of gold.   
  
Well, the trees they got much smaller,   
The lake a lady's mirror,   
We stopped to drink some wine.   
Then he threw the bottle over.   
Broke a minute later   
And he put his hand on mine.   
Thought I saw an eagle   
But it might have been a vulture,   
I never could decide.   
Then my father built an altar,   
He looked once behind his shoulder,   
He knew I would not hide.   
  
You who build these altars now   
To sacrifice these children,   
You must not do it anymore.   
A scheme is not a vision   
And you never have been tempted   
By a demon or a god.   
You who stand above them now,   
Your hatchets blunt and bloody,   
You were not there before,   
When I lay upon a mountain   
And my father's hand was trembling   
With the beauty of the word.   
  
And if you call me brother now,   
Forgive me if I inquire,   
"just according to whose plan?"   
When it all comes down to dust   
I will kill you if I must,   
I will help you if I can.   
When it all comes down to dust   
I will help you if I must,   
I will kill you if I can.   
And mercy on our uniform,   
Man of peace or man of war,   
The peacock spreads his fan.