The first thought that occurred to me about these propers was how badly God comes off in the reading from Genesis. I mean, Abraham looks like a rock star in the world of negotiation. He uses an effective technique in his conversation with God: What can of God would you be, he implies, if you allowed that kind of collateral damage? Fifty people, come on, Abraham says. Then he says, but after all, what do I know? I’m just ashes and dust. (You have to love that echo of Ash Wednesday, remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. And, in the burial liturgy, “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Abraham was ahead of his time, at least in terms of Episcopal liturgy and practice.

And, once again, an impressive negotiator. Within a few sentences he has struck an even better deal with God,

My problem is the way God is portrayed here. In the first place, God has told Abraham only that someone would check out the situation in Sodom and Gomorrah, based on the bad reports of that community. Abraham is the one who, knowing God as he does, knows that this will turn into wholesale destruction—lots of collateral damage. What kind of God, indeed, would do such a thing? You might be waiting for me to say something redeeming here about God, but I’m sorry to disappoint you.

The best I can do is to say that this description is born out of a time and culture that viewed God as a somewhat benign dictator, an autocrat who ruled with an iron fist. That vengeful God about whom Jonathan Edwards preached in his famous sermon, “Miserable sinners in the hands of an angry God.” That scowling, heavy-browed, white-bearded God painted in the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

This hard-to-convince, ready-for-annihilation God, in my opinion, exists in the imagination of the faithful followers of God in that generation. Do let me be clear that I don’t pretend to have a full understanding of the divine nature, even for our own generations, much less beyond that. Still, I find myself looking at the readings from a different perspective.

What is God’s role and character, apart from Abraham’s assumptions and preconceptions?

God—like Mary in last week’s gospel—listens. Though God knows our needs before we ask, there is also the matter of our offering ourselves to God in terms of what we pray for and how we pray. We reveal ourselves—our inmost selves—to God precisely by presenting our needs and hopes and desires. And we learn a bit about those parts of ourselves in the process.

The Gospel deals with exactly those issues, as one of the disciples puts it as simply as, “How do we pray?’ He asks this of God in the flesh, Jesus, the Messiah. And Jesus tells him a straightforward prayer which we still pray, in ochurch, at AA meetings, and at all manner of ecumenical and interfaith gatherings. And in our beds at night and/or in the morning.

Here's what one of my spiritual heroes, Frederick Buechner, has to say about this instruction, an excerpt from his sermon “The Power of God and the Power of Man:”

Maybe some say, "I know human love, and I know something of its power to heal, to set free, to give meaning and peace, but God's love I know only as a phrase." Maybe others also say this, "For all the power that human love has to heal, there is something deep within me and within the people I know best that is not healed but aches with longing still. So if God's love is powerful enough to reach that deep, how do I find it? How?"

If that is really the question, if we are really seeking this power, then I have one thing to say—perhaps it is not the only thing, but it is enormously important: ask for it. There is something in me that recoils a little at speaking so directly and childishly, but I speak this way anyway because it is the most important thing I have in me to say. Ask, and you will receive. And there is the other side to it too: if you have never known the power of God's love, then maybe it is because you have never asked to know it—I mean really asked, expecting an answer.

I am saying just this: go to him the way the father of the sick boy did and ask him. Pray to him, is what I am saying. In whatever words you have. And if the little voice that is inside all of us as the inheritance of generations of unfaith, if this little voice inside says, "But I don't believe. I don't believe," don't worry too much. Just keep on anyway. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" is the best any of us can do really, but thank God it is enough.

Finally, I would point out that after Jesus has told his disciples “Ask, and you will receive,” he ends by saying, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” So God, knowing us and what we need gives us always what we need the most—the Holy Spirit, to guide us, to comfort us, to love us and stand by us, in our disbelief and in the times of heartfelt belief and awareness of God’s grace and love. + + +