

July 2, 2017

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Genesis 22:1-14

Here I Am

There's a hymn that we sometimes sing that has a chorus that begins with three words, (*spoken:*) "Here I am" (*sung:*) "Here I am, Lord..." As it continues, "I have heard you calling in the night," it becomes clear the chorus takes its words from the Old Testament story of Samuel, who became a prophet, from a story that occurred back when Samuel was a boy, when late at night he heard someone calling to him. Young Samuel didn't know who it was who was calling him, and so he told his mentor, the older prophet Eli, about it. Old Eli told him, "It's God. Say, 'Here I am.'" And so Samuel did. (*sung:*) "Here I am..."

But that's not the only time in the Bible that this phrase occurs. "Here I am" also appears in the Old Testament story for today. In the story we just heard from Genesis, the words, "Here I am," are spoken not by a boy, but by a man, an old man, Abraham. At first, Abraham also seems to say them eagerly. Maybe Abraham even sang them, when, right at the beginning of today's story God calls and Abraham says, for the first time, "Here I am!" And then God says, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love... and sacrifice him to me."

And Abraham sets out to do so. As Abraham complied, when Sarah told him to send his son Ishmael out into the wilderness to die, so Abraham complies when God tells him to take his son Isaac out into the wilderness, that he may die. Abraham sets out to do so. There is no mention of Sarah in this story. Abraham sets off, early in the morning, maybe he set off early under cover of darkness, without talking to Sarah. Is it telling that, after this story, the Bible records no other conversation that Abraham and Sarah may or may not have had, if they ever spoke to one another again?

Abraham sets off, with Isaac, and they travel together for two days. As far as the text indicates they are silent days, it is a silent journey. And then it is on the third day, Abraham and Isaac, who've been travelling with servants and a pack animal, leave all that behind. On the third day Abraham and Isaac continue on, just the two of them. Now it is Isaac who carries the wood for the sacrifice. But where is the sacrifice? Isaac asks, prefacing his question with "Father!" And again Abraham says, "Here I am." Surely now the only song this can be is a song of lament, "Here I am."

What was going through Abraham's mind?

What was going through Isaac's mind? Did he know what was about to happen? Isaac's question sounds innocent, and he's referred to as a boy, but there's no definitive description of his age. He is old enough, strong enough, to carry the wood himself. Meanwhile Abraham, who became a father when advanced in years, carries only the flint and the knife—the knife that he lays on his son's throat, steadying his shaking hands as he's about to draw the blade on his bound son. Suddenly an angel of the Lord calls, "Abraham!" And Abraham, gasps, chokes out, "Here I am," and Isaac's life is spared."

Was Abraham faithful? So the Bible seems to say. Abraham was so faithful he followed directives from God that would countermand God's earlier, everlasting promise. Abraham was so faithful he was willing to give up the very thing upon which the promise depended—but not just a thing, a beloved son. Abraham was willing, not just to give it up, but to kill it, to take a knife into his own hand and kill his own child. Anyone who would do so today, explaining their

actions as directed by God, would be likely judged insane. Anyone who would do so today would be rightly judged abhorrent. So also is the judgement of the Old Testament prophets, who speak the voice of God, who rail against child sacrifice. Child sacrifice is abhorrent to God—though it was prevalent then.

Not only then. Since ancient times and even now, religious devotion has inspired, has been suggested as justification for, horrific acts, terror, war, the worst kind of abuse. Then, and now, we must ask, what can we say about this? What answer can religious conviction give? Was Abraham faithful, or a monster? Was the ram in the bush sent as a reward, a gold sticker on a ghastly test, or was God, once again, saving Abraham from himself?

“Here I am,” Abraham says, cries, croaks out, “Here I am,” caught between ethics and obedience, familial love and trust in God, heart and hope, here he is, Abraham, recipient of the promise and impediment to it. What can we say about what he did or didn’t do? About what this story? About what it means for us?

As I was wondering what I could possibly say about so perplexing and powerful a text, I remembered that *Here I Am* is also the name of a new novel by the writer Jonathan Safran Foer. In *Here I Am*, Foer, who is Jewish, draws on themes of this story in Genesis as he writes a story of a modern, Jewish family, living in Washington DC, a story of conflicting duties of father and husband, child and parent, Jew and American. I remembered reading about this in a book review a couple of months ago. As I tried to think what to say today, I thought, maybe if I reread that review, that will be helpful? So I typed the title of Foer’s book into my iphone. Do you know what comes up when you type into a search engine, “Here I Am”? Do you know what comes up? An address: where you are, at that very moment. I know you probably want to test it out right now, let me tell you I checked it several times in different locations, just to be sure, I had a strange lack of trust in it, while also feeling incredulous at the blunt significance. Always, same result. You want to know about Here I am? It’s where you are, wherever you are, right now. Here I am, right now, at the intersection of Belle Plaine and Harding. Here I am, at the intersection of faith and life. Here I am at the intersection of heartbreak and provision. Here I am in a country that is great and free and prejudiced and mean. Here I am, in a world that is ridiculously beautiful, and inexplicably cruel. Here we are, all the time, in every place, called by God, tested by life, seeking to be faithful. Here we are, like Abraham.

Did Abraham pass the test—or did he fail it? I don’t think there is an easy answer. But I think an even harder question isn’t about Abraham, it’s about God: Is God a monster? And if not, in the name of God, why do monstrous things happen? If God is loving and all powerful, why does evil exist and the innocent suffer?

Christian faith does not offer an easy answer. It offers a beloved Son, who carries the wood for the sacrifice—the wood of the cross—a beloved Son who is God himself, who offers himself. God himself comes to a world enraptured with false worship, a world bound with injustice and gasping in pain, God comes to this world, and offers himself, and on the third day, rises. .

The prophets tell of this. In the voice of God, the prophets say that this is what God chooses to do, and this is true worship: to loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share bread with the hungry, to bring in the homeless poor. This is what the Bible says. “Then you shall call,” it says, “and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”