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Calvary Episcopal Church / Kaneohe, Hawaii
4th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8A: 28 June 2020
Genesis 22:1-14 / Psalm 13 / Romans 6:12-23 / Matthew 10:40-42

Good morning... to all of you here in person, and to all gathered from near and far, online. I am especially grateful to those of you who have been trying to be with us as we had connection difficulties last week.

Well... the lectionary has done it again. Part of what it does, week after week, is come at us with some of the stories, themes, and issues we might rather not touch upon – but that are part of the word of God nonetheless. Like today, for example. We continue in the semi-continuous passages from Genesis, and return to Abraham once again in Genesis 22 this week.

So... I don't know about you, but this is a really kind of terrible reading. Abraham, the one who was told he'd become the father of many nations, with many descendants, is told to slaughter his son – on an altar. With wood and fire. God told him to go and do it, so he does... almost. Fortunately, like the superhero who saves the day at the last minute, the angel of God intervenes, and God does, in fact, provide a ram – a bull, for the burnt offering.

There is so much to be frustrated, upset, annoyed with this story. And I hope you have a kind of visceral, gut wrenching reaction to hearing it today. For those who are parents and for those who are not, it should make us question everything we thought we knew about who God is and what God demands of us.

There have been lots of attempts to make sense of this bizarre and terrifying story. Some have said it's about the extraordinary faith of Abraham; others, that it's a kind of pre-figuring of Christ – the only Son of God who goes to the cross for us. Or that it's a recording simply of some of the ritual practices present in the cultures surrounding Abraham's own people. Or that it's even a kind of divine sanctioned child abuse. Think of the terror of that poor boy, Isaac bound upon that altar. Is Abraham mentally deranged? All of these have been suggested as possible readings of this strange text from the Bible. And yet, as part of the word of God, we are called to hear it (somehow) with fresh ears and see it with fresh eyes.

I prefer another way to understand this, and possibly others, of those really difficult passages in the Bible: symbol and hyperbole. Symbol, as we know and understand from other sections of the Bible – like the visions of Ezekiel, or the parables of Jesus, or the prophecy of Revelation. Symbols of this nature are meant to be stunning to us – not necessarily for their elegance, but for their ability to stop us in our tracks.

So I suggest as we hear this story of Abraham and Isaac, that we consider the vivid symbols: the unwavering and even fanatical devotion from Abraham... the innocence of Isaac... the just-in-time superhero angel. And the fire – the consuming, engulfing, and terrifying yet familiar fire.

One of those symbols I suggest we consider is Abraham's simple answer to the calling out from God and from the angel: "Here I am..." It's almost simple enough to discard. But therein lies the power to do what the story itself does – draw us in to the purposes of God. "Here I am" tells us that Abraham was receptive (if, I assume, reluctant) to God's demands of him. And it also tells us that we are also, perhaps, meant to offer ourselves up with a simple "Here I am, O God..." We cannot hide when we say "Here I am". We cannot pretend to not hear what God's calling on us may be telling us.

"Here I am" fits nicely with where Jesus calls his disciples as well. He intends, I think, for all who would follow him to respond with all of who they are – to be ready and willing and to act with one's whole self: body, mind, spirit – and with the hands and feet ready to go and work.

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, Jesus said. And welcome, if you think about it, usually means one's whole self – to welcome you into someone's home, for instance. "Here I am" is the way we make ourselves useful to God, and so it makes sense that if we are, in fact, welcomed as one who has responded to a calling from God, we have helped God to be welcome in a particular place as well.

Finally, the words of the Lord echo to us in our own day: "whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward." With as much need as we know is present in our own world today, especially with the coronavirus pandemic, I wonder if exactly what we need is right under our nose: "Here I am..." A simple cup of cold water. An act of responding to the call of the Lord.

God calls out to each one of us. Would that we be able to respond with the simple but profound, "Here I am..." God will then use us to welcome others into his kingdom. "Here I am, O God..." May those be our words to our God and to this world that God loves. Amen.