

SERMON
St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA
The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")
June 26, 2011

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| <p>The Second Sunday after Pentecost Proper 8A, Revised Common Lectionary Genesis 22:1-14</p> |
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In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Actor and comedian Bill Cosby has an old routine that depicts the first conversation between God and Noah:

Noah is at work in his yard, when a voice thunders down from heaven, "Noah!" Noah looks around, and seeing nothing returns to his chores. "Noah!" Noah looks around again and says, "Who is that?" "It's the Lord, Noah." And Noah said, "Yeah, right!"

The Lord will call again, but "Yeah, right!" is about all that Noah will be able to muster.

If we look closely at the Genesis text, we learn that God did not, in fact, call Noah by name in this way. But, Cosby's question is a good one: What if he had? What would Noah have said if God had called him by name? What would we have said if God had called us by name?

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Abraham the Patriarch didn't have to imagine. There he was, residing in the land of the Philistines, when the voice of God thundered down from heaven: "Abraham!"

We would have understood if Abraham, like Cosby's Noah, asked for some clarification, some verification that this was indeed God's voice. But, Abraham does not. Abraham has heard the voice of God before, and he replies ever so simply, ever so humbly, "Here am I."

Over the next several centuries, three more men – Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah – would all have the same experience. God calls out for each of them, and each one says, "Here am I."¹

In Hebrew, this phrase "Here am I" is common enough.² But, there is nothing common about the situations in which Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah find themselves. The God who spoke the universe into being is speaking again, and their names are on his lips. They respond immediately. They respond without knowing the details. They respond without counting the cost. "Here am I."

When God calls his people to his service, there is only one song our hearts can sing: "Here am I."

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¹ Cf., Exodus 3:4, 1 Samuel 3:4, and Isaiah 6:8.

² In Hebrew, this phrase is *hineni*, a common word that can also be translated "Yes," in the sense of responding to someone's inquiry. The same word used in all four of the call narratives mentioned above.

In retrospect, it would have been wise for each of these men to ask some questions before they agreed to heed God's call. Moses would be asked to lead a weary band of pilgrims on a forty-year journey in the wilderness. Isaiah had to prophesy the downfall of Judah, and Samuel proclaimed judgment against the house of Eli.

But, Abraham's calling was hardest of all. To Abraham, God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and [offer him] as a burnt offering."

To say that Abraham loved Isaac is a gross understatement. Abraham cherished Isaac, he prized Isaac, he wondered at Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were old, and after a lifetime of barrenness, they had accepted the great tragedy that children were not in their future. Then came Isaac.

God told Abraham that he would become the patriarch of a great nation, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars.³ Without Isaac, none of this would be possible. Isaac was a blessing in himself and he was the key to many more blessings in the future. Isaac meant everything to Abraham, more than life itself.

God asked Abraham to give up that one thing that he held most dear, that one thing that he loved more than anything else. And, Abraham said, "Here am I."

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In 1942, General Douglas MacArthur pulled his forces out of the Philippines with the dramatic promise: "I shall return!" Historians tell us that MacArthur wanted to return to Corregidor and finish what he had begun, but for some of his men, the cause was far more personal.

My grandmother's sister was among a small group of women who had followed their fly-boy husbands to the Far East. When the soldiers pulled out with MacArthur, the women stayed behind, spending the rest of the war in a makeshift Japanese prison at Santo Tomas University in Manila.

I don't know very much about Aunt Margie's day-to-day life at Santo Tomas, but I do wonder what it was like. Did she keep dried rose petals from her husband pressed in the pages of her diary? Did she wear a wedding band to stroke at night and remind herself of his love? Did she have a snapshot or two tucked under her mattress as a reminder of better times together, both past and future?

I don't know if Aunt Margie had any of these things, but suppose for a moment that she did. Imagine how valuable – how invaluable – each one would have been to her. Now, imagine that she was told to give them up: to burn the petals, to smelt the ring, and to shred the pictures.

The pain would have been exquisite; total devastation at the loss of that which was her only source of hope. Thus, I think, was the pain of Abraham, asked to give up not only his child, but his only tangible reminder of God's promise.

God called, and Abraham said, "Here am I." Despite the pain, he would never look back.

³ Genesis 15:1-6

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Please don't misunderstand me: God does not desire the death of our children or the destruction of our memories. But, God does require absolute devotion. Nothing can be allowed to come between God and us: not ego, not money, not family. Nothing. We are not at liberty to love anything more than we love God.

The question with which this story leaves us is as obvious as it is frightening: Are there things in our lives that we explicitly or implicitly value more than our relationship with God?

Each of us will answer this intensely personal question differently, because we all cherish different things, but my point is this: To live a life of faith, we must be willing, *truly* willing, to give everything away.

Abraham passed God's test. Abraham ascended the mount of the Lord and stood ready to give away that which he cherished the most. Only then did God speak again: "Abraham, Abraham!" And, Abraham said again, "Here am I."

Abraham's faithfulness having been proved, God sent a ram to take Isaac's place on the pyre. As is it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

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The mount of the Lord is not a specific place. It is the place to which God led Abraham and Isaac as they embarked on what really was a pilgrimage. The mount of the Lord is the place to which God is leading us every day. The mount of the Lord is any place whereon God and his people stand together.

There is nothing easy about getting to the mount of the Lord. The journey involves a healthy dose of commitment and it requires that we offer up to God those things that we hold most dear.

But, once we find our way, once we are standing on the mount of the Lord, everything we need shall be provided: Life and health, light and salvation, streaming forth from the wellspring of God.

My brothers and my sisters in Christ, the God who spoke the universe into being is speaking again. God's voice is again thundering down from heaven, and ours are the names on his lips.

God is calling, and my prayer is that we will each have the humility, the faith, and most especially the courage to answer simply: "Here are we, bound for the mount of the Lord."

Amen.