

GENESIS 22:1-15 (NEB)

The time came when God put Abraham to the test. "Abraham", he called and Abraham replied, "Here I am." God said, "Take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the hills which I will show you."

So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass and he took with him two of his men and his son Isaac. And he split the firewood for the sacrifice and set out for the place of which God had spoken. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his men, "Stay here with the ass while I and the boy go over there. And when we have worshipped we will come back to you."

So Abraham took the wood for the sacrifice and laid it on his son Isaac's shoulder. He himself carried the fire and the knife and the two of them went on together. Isaac said to Abraham, "Father," and he answered, "What is it, my son?" Isaac said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the young beast for the sacrifice?" Abraham answered, "God will himself provide with a young beast for a sacrifice, my son."

And the two of them went on together and came to the place of which God had spoken. There Abraham built an altar on the top of the wood. Then he stretched out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham." He answered, "Here I am." And the angel of the Lord said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy; do not touch him. Now I know that you are a God-fearing man. You have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there he saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it as a sacrifice instead of his son. Abraham named that place *Jehovah-jireh*. And to this day the saying is: "*In the mountain of the Lord it was provided.*"

I AM: Part III

THE QUIET ZONE

Genesis 22:1-15 (NEB)

In his novel, **Here I Am**, by which our three part series was inspired, author Jonathan Safran Foer reflects upon the meaning of our scripture for this morning. Listen as he offers his unique interpretation of the story: *God's test of Abraham is written like this: "He said to him, 'Abraham!' 'Here I am.' Abraham replied." Most people assume that the test is...God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. But I think it could also be read that the test was when He called to him. Abraham didn't say, "What do you want?" He didn't say, "Yes?" He answered with a statement: "Here I am." Whatever God needs or wants, Abraham is wholly present for Him, without conditions or reservations or need for explanation...*

Here I am comes up two other times. When Abraham is taking Isaac up Mount Moriah, Isaac becomes aware of what they are doing. He knows that he is about to be the sacrifice, in the way that all kids always do when it's about to happen. Isaac said to Abraham, 'Father!' and (Abraham) said, "Here I am, my son." And Isaac said, "Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offering?" And (again) Abraham doesn't ask, "What do you want?" He says, "Here I am." When God asks for Abraham, Abraham is wholly present for God. When Isaac asks for Abraham, Abraham is wholly present for his son...And the Lord's messenger called out to him from the heavens, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" and he said, "Here I am."(Once more) Abraham does not ask, "What do you want?" He says, "Here I am."It is primarily about who we are wholly there for, and how that, more than anything else, defines our identity.

In the first two parts of this series, we have been exploring the depth of *I-Amness* as it relates to both God and to ourselves. We initially grappled with the question of Who God is as portrayed by the Exodus account of Moses' encounter with God in the story of the Burning

Bush. When Moses seeks to understand the nature of the Deity, God's name tag reads *I Am Who I Am*. And what we surmised from this is God can only be experienced as a Presence. God is known through God's *Hereness*. And if God is the Creator, then God is everywhere and always.

Secondly, using Samuel's call to his prophetic station, we focused our attention on who we are. Samuel too answered God's call by stating, "Here I am." If God can only be experienced as a presence, then isn't the same also true of us? And we saw that who we are is hardly static. We change enormously over the course of our lives, continuously evolving, and it is a significant feature of our spirituality to take charge of our personal growth. Being present is centered in self-awareness requiring us to learn from everything—especially our mistakes. As Mark Twain said, "Failure is inevitable. Learning from it is optional."

And today we conclude the series by zooming in on the rich story of God's test of Abraham. How do we tie all of these dynamics of Presence together? How do we know when God is calling us and how do we make ourselves present when we are summoned?

The first key to knowing when anyone is calling us happens to be listening. It is rather fundamental to the entire process. Listening is paying attention. And already we have a problem because our attention is so divided and dispersed. Before any research was done on the subject, it was widely believed that multi-tasking was the most efficient manner to achieve our goals. Now we have unequivocally learned that it is quite the opposite. The great majority of automobile accidents are caused by distracted drivers. And it isn't just texting or yakking on the phone—blue tooth conversations are no less risky than hand held cells—it is also conversations between driver and passengers. In a recent poll, 100% of those surveyed pleaded *mea culpa* to distracted driving. You have probably also seen You Tube videos which are pretty funny—but also sadly tragic—of people tripping off curbs, stepping into holes and even falling into swimming pools while walking and reading a text message. It is impossible to listen to more than one thing at a time. And because we are frequently guilty of doing so, I

would suggest that most of us are suffering from a case of spiritual A.D.D. Life, technology and busy-ness keep us hopping from one foot to the other—or tripping over our own two feet. And though it stresses us out, if everything comes to a sudden halt, we don't even know what to do with ourselves. So to even ask how we know when God is speaking to us must be preceded by a primary question of how do we discipline ourselves to even give ear to what God may be saying?

If you are paying attention to the local news, most of you are aware that Glendale is in the process of establishing a Quiet Zone which will eliminate some of the train noise by prohibiting the engineers from blowing their whistles. That seems a suitable metaphor for what we are talking about. While we cannot eliminate all of the distracting and often disturbing noises in our lives—the trains will still rumble by—we can establish our own Quiet Zone where we intentionally and regularly shut it all off and just be present to what is.

If God is everywhere and always present, then we hardly need to go seeking after God. God will find us, but when God calls, if we say, “Hold on a minute”, “Not now”, “I'll get back to you later when I have time”, then God will remain absent to us. People who are spiritually disciplined know this. For me, I cannot effectively write a sermon without engaging the Divine. I have to get into a Quiet Zone and then it is amazing what occurs—the ideas seem to jettison to me out of nowhere. If I get stuck, I go for a walk.

The problem, however, is that there will be those times for all of us when the call may not be exactly what we had in mind. Moses certainly did not want to be assigned negotiator-in-chief to confront Pharaoh over the release of the Hebrews from Egypt. Nor did Samuel relish the prospect of informing Eli that his sons were about to be punished for their iniquity. I also doubt that Abraham was looking forward to cutting his son's throat. And was Isaac keen on becoming a living sacrifice? I will frankly tell you that I have sometimes dreaded the prospect of preaching on subjects I knew would create controversy and stir up anger. But I

felt called to apply the gospel which is radical and often not comfortable. And I could not get away from it. One of the things I have learned over the years is that when I resist what I believe God is summoning me to do, that is usually a sign that the summons is genuine.

God will use all of us if we are willing to be used, but do not suppose it will necessarily be comfortable or fun. But in each of our three scriptures, even though the work was hard, the reward was astounding. Abraham went on to become the father of a great nation. Moses astonishingly freed the slaves and led them to the Promised Land. And Samuel went on to become one of the great and influential prophets for God's people.

The point is, we may not know why God calls us or what exactly it will require of us, but our faith leads us to trust that the answers will make themselves known. There will be a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. In spite of the fact that he was fully committed to sacrificing Isaac if it came to that, I do not believe Abraham ever doubted another solution would emerge. "God himself will provide with a young beast for a sacrifice, my son."

As always, we are responsible for our own relationship to the Divine. What it mostly takes is the invitation, the willingness to acknowledge that God is present for us. There is always a response, even though it may take some time and not be immediately apparent. We only need three words in responding to God; the same words that God uses in responding to us: ***HERE I AM!*** Those are the words that will ultimately define us.

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