

HERE I AM, LORD

Rev. Mary Barrett Speers
Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

My old friend Bill Philippe is a great storyteller. Here's one of my favorites:

The preacher was giving a sermon on stewardship. When it came time for the offering, the plate came to a pew where there was a very small boy sitting on the aisle. He looked up at the deacon and said, "Could you lower the plate?"

Thinking that he wanted to see what was in the plate, the deacon held it down a bit. "No," said the boy, "a little lower, please." The deacon lowered it a bit more.

"More," the boy said. "Could you just put it on the floor?" The deacon was aghast, but finally put it on the floor. The boy stepped into it, stood there, and said,

"This is what I give to the Lord. Lord, here I am!"

"Here I am," Abraham says to God—and to his son Isaac—and so do Jacob and Esau and Joseph, and Samuel, and David, and Isaiah and Jeremiah, and in the New Testament, Ananias and Paul...they all say "Here I am!" when God, or anyone they love, calls them.

"Here I am," says Abraham, and—be honest—don't you think that here, in this story anyway, Abraham looks a lot better than God does? Carl Jung wrote a whole book about God doing something like this to Job, only much later—Job looks good, but God? God comes off, Jung says, like nothing so much as, well, a typical capricious, bloodthirsty pagan deity.

But does Abraham argue with God, another time-honored Biblical tradition? No: Abraham holds nothing back. He's willing even to sacrifice his precious, long-awaited, promised son, if God requires it. "The Lord giveth," says Job, "and the Lord taketh away. Blest be the name of the Lord."

I don't know about you,, but if God asked me to kill somebody to prove my love for God, you bet I'd argue with God. I'd probably blog about it, how cruel and heartless God was. I'd probably decide I was through with God, if God was really like that.

But let's back up. Let's think about what has now become a lifelong (for Abraham) relationship with God. This isn't the first thing God has called Abraham to do. God hasn't just asked Abraham out of nowhere to go and sacrifice his own child, but rather God has already called him many times, and every time, God has appeared with some preposterous promise or outrageous request. And it's always worked out better for Abraham when he trusts God.

God has spoken over and over to Abraham, and by now, the longer Abraham has lived in relationship with God, the more Abraham knows God and trusts God. That's what happens when you're living out a permanent commitment. As the relationship grew, the Bible tells us, "Abraham trusted God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" [Romans 4:3]. Martin Luther's bottom line. And remember what William James had to say? "It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all."

So even though this bizarre and cruel request doesn't even sound like God, or even remotely like anything God would ever want for anyone to do, Abraham trusts God enough by this time that he's willing to surrender his beloved son. He's willing, in the words of the old hymn, to "lay his all on the altar." Abraham holds nothing back. God certainly doesn't sound like God at that moment, but Abraham still trusts that God is good, and he still believes God's purpose is good. Here I am, Lord.

Now, this may disturb you, but I don't believe this story is about obedience; in fact, I flat out think it's a grave error for the church to preach obedience at all.

To the Christian Right, obedience is the cardinal Christian virtue—meaning, or intending to mean, obedience to God, and that’s certainly Biblical, but then it seeps into human relationships, like marriage. The problem I have with preaching obedience is it tends to carry over into all aspects of life, and in fact you hear it preached mostly to small children because it suits the convenience of the adults, or to churchgoers in the more authoritarian kinds of Christianity because it suits the convenience of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or simply of those in power in whatever context.

But if you preach obedience, well, it doesn’t make your children any more obedient, does it (in fact, you know that when you find yourself resorting to “I AM YOUR MOTHER!” you’re losing the argument), but when we grow up, it’s like a time bomb. It comes out later, and when you preach obedience to children, it doesn’t make them obedient, but when they grow up, you tend to get a whole nation of obedient adults—in other words, you get a field fertile for the Divine Right of Kings, and all the military dictatorships we’ve seen in the twentieth, and now even the twenty-first, century, and *that’s* my problem with preaching obedience.

And besides, I don’t think that’s what’s going on here, not really. I’d rather talk about allegiance, loyalty, faithfulness, trust—in other words, things that grow with relationship, and decisions that come from the *power of relationship*, rather than from the imposed might of authority.

There are actually two words in the New Testament that make that distinction: there’s *exousia*, which means the authority conferred by the world, teachers over students, principals over teachers, etc., etc.—structural, institutional authority from the top down—and then there’s *dynamis*, more like natural energy, the power that surges up from within and gives life to us all, the power we know when we fall in love, or find ourselves caught up in following Jesus, the power that, according to Carter Heyward, is the power of the Holy Spirit moving within and among us. And Spirit-*dynamis*, Spirit-power, Heyward says, most always chooses to grow and surge within *relationship*.

And if we’re growing in that way in relationship, as Jesus says here in Matthew’s Gospel, last week and then continuing today, well, it’s going to cause divided loyalties.

The bald fact is, if your relationship with Christ is alive and growing, of course you’re going to make some choices based on loyalty to Christ, and to your life-giving relationship with Christ, that are going to feel to people you love like disloyalty to them—just as a for-instance, you might decide that what your own church was doing on a given Sunday was more important to you than your second cousin’s fourth child’s baptism, and this time you weren’t going to miss church to drive two and a half hours just for that, and some of your family might think that was at least weird, and maybe be hurt, and maybe tell everyone at the baptism that your family loyalty was eroding...

Okay, so when we talk about loyalties, we’re also talking about priorities, and it’s clear from both of these Bible readings that although yes, church is a family, our relationship with God isn’t church, or family, it’s...our relationship with God. Both church and family help us with that, but neither church nor family *is* God. And the wisdom of the ages is that if we put either of these, or anything else, in the place of God, we, and all the people around us, suffer too. As Jesus would say, if we look to save our lives, we lose them. Or at least, we lose our soul as a church.

Putting our relationship with God first is something we learn to do as we learn to trust God, and as the joyful life with God unfolds in us. And we learn that when we put our relationship with God before everything else, it makes everything else—family and church and work and *everything*—work better. And we learn that it’s an all-or-nothing proposition. We remember that in classic Christian doctrine, Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his beloved son, is a “type” for God. We remember that in classic Christian doctrine God, as God the father, held nothing back; and that God, in the person of Jesus, held nothing back, but gave his all for us. “Here I am,” says Jesus—to God, to the church, and to each one of us. “Follow Me.”

So, now. As you know, we at SPC have had a call from God. I can't tell the full story in the sermon because the sermon gets printed and posted on the website, and there are identities to protect. You'll hear the story soon.

But for the moment, suffice it to say that yes, after we worked since November to make careful plans around what *we* were comfortable with, God had other ideas. When Session had heard the whole story, the plight of this family fleeing persecution and facing certain death if they return, who sought asylum and followed all the protocols only to have their asylum denied on a catch-22 technicality in our own law, we voted 10-3 to offer them physical sanctuary so that they would have time to prepare an appeal. The Mattituck church and the Southold church, and then the Presbytery of Long Island, have already voted to come alongside us.

And then, since then, we've learned that the family has found excellent legal counsel, through the New Sanctuary Coalition of New York City, and there is a good chance this family might achieve within the two weeks they have left a favorable outcome on asylum on appeal, so they are not coming to us just yet, if at all.

Now, perhaps to some of us, this feels just like finding that lamb in the thorns at the last minute must have felt to Abraham! But there will be other families, and this one may even need us later after all. The point is, there is no road map for this. We plan, but then things change so rapidly that we plan again.

You see, this time, somebody's life *is* at stake—but the lives aren't ours. This week, we celebrate Independence Day. Now, we aren't the Culper Spy Ring, who risked certain execution, and perhaps that of their families, for taking their part in standing up to tyranny. This family who stood up to tyranny, and other such families who are also our neighbors, are much closer to our eighteenth-century forebears, in the level of risk they take, than we are.

But for us? The important thing right now is not, "what will people think?" or "what will happen to our institution?" but "what does God think?" and "what does Jesus call us to do?" And we know the answers to that, because we've read them in the Bible.

We are not the ones whose lives are at risk—unless we choose to do nothing. And then it's our soul—and the lives of others. We are not being asked to sacrifice anything but our comfort. I don't read anywhere in the Bible that we are called to institutional survival, or, for that matter, anywhere in the Book of Order that we are to preserve anything but the truth.

And Jesus is clear: what does it profit us to gain the whole world and lose our soul? If we seek to save our life, we lose it. But if we are willing to lose our life, that's when we find it. Saint Andrew's church in Austin, Texas told me, "We thought we were saving them. They saved us." That's what Jesus was talking about. That's how it works.

I'm not saying that I think we are being called to fall on any swords or climb up any crosses. I'm not saying I think we're called to cheap notoriety or flashy martyrdom. (If you knew me longer, you'd know that was not my style. Usually, I'd much rather work patiently through the existing structures.)

But in this, I *am* saying that we are called, like Abraham, to be ready. I *am* saying we are called to be willing. I *am* saying what we all know: that we are called to follow Jesus—individually, of course, but also *as a church*.

I am saying that like Abraham, like that little boy in the aisle pew, like Jesus himself, we are called to put our whole selves, each of us in our own way, but all of us together, in that offering plate, saying, "Here I am, Lord..."

...or, in the words of Martin Luther five hundred years ago,

"Here I stand. I can do no other."

AMEN.