

HERE I AM
Genesis 22: 1-14; Matthew 10: 40-42
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time • June 28, 2020
by Pat Berger

Do you have a list of questions that you would like to ask God, one of these days, when you get to meet toe to divine toe? I decided this week that I needed to add one to my list. Now, "why?" is a God question, and I would be asking God, so it's okay if I ask "why"; so my new question is: why is the story of the binding of Isaac in the Bible?! The story is scary, and surely there might have been other ways to make the necessary point. What is up? One of the commentators that I read this week wrote, "Here is a chapter of the Old Testament which shows the need of reading with discretion and discrimination." I would think so, and I'll do my best. It is clear, early on, that God is opposed to human sacrifice; God keeps God's promises; what is up?

Enough ranting. The One God was different than the other gods in the neighborhood, and if Abraham were going to be a leader for the One God, that God needed to know that Abraham could be trusted. Abraham knew by now that God could be trusted, but God did not know for sure about Abraham -- God did not know just how this scenario was going to play out. When God called, Abraham did not hide or set out for the other end of the earth; Abraham just said, "Here I am." God told him what the task was, and still Abraham neither hid nor ran; the next morning, he just packed, cut a load of wood for the fire, took two servants and son Isaac (who was well an adult by now), and headed for Moriah, the mountain that God would show him. Three days of walking later, they saw the mountain. Abraham told the servants to wait with the donkey, and he and Isaac continued walking, Isaac loaded with firewood and Abraham with fire and knife. "Hey, Dad!" Isaac said, and once again Abraham said, "Here I am." He was as responsive to his son as he had been to God. "So, where's the lamb for the sacrifice?" Isaac asked, and Abraham answered, "God will provide." Abraham, indeed, trusted.

One more time Abraham would say, "Here I am," in this reading: he was standing at the altar, his son had been strapped down, and the knife was in Abraham's hand. And an angel said, "Abraham! Abraham!" And Abraham said, "Here I am." "Stop!" said the angel; "Now I know: I can trust you," and Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a bush. Whew. The knife was used on the ram. Abraham called the place, "The LORD will provide." One commentator wrote: ". . . the point of the story may be that while grace is free, maturity in faith is very costly. Although God's love is simple, living it is never easy. Although the journey of faith is full of joyful surprise, . . . it is also filled with sacrifice." No doubt: a bit of why the story needed to be included.

That quote could also, no doubt, be applied to what Jesus' disciples were learning in our reading this morning from Matthew, too. The disciples had already said to Jesus, "Here I am," at least once, and maybe every day, and at our reading here he was giving them some warnings and some promises. In these three verses, the warnings and promises seem not to be a case of one or the other, but rather: this is what it is to be a disciple. They would be seen as prophets and as righteous ones -- and in their circumstances, this would have been as much warning as reward. They might, indeed, come to their own Mount Moriah. They were prophets and they were righteous -- and they were the little ones, and there would be days when a cup of cold water would indeed be a gift. This wasn't to cause them to be distrustful of others, though; instead, the instruction to the disciples was that they were to be welcoming. And likely, Jesus didn't have in mind just shaking someone's hand and saying, it's good to see you; in that culture, they would have done that without even thinking.

However. When they welcomed a prophet as a prophet, they would need to be prepared to face opposition and maybe violence from those who were in power. When they welcomed the righteous, they would be greeting those who worked for justice, potentially risking their lives in the process, and they would need to be ready again for opposition. And giving cold water to a little one: well, the disciples were the little ones in their circumstances -- they risked being rejected by leaders as well as by their equals. And these were what the disciples' ministry was to be. They were not called to spread good news to family and friends. The disciples were being sent, possibly far away and definitely to the stranger, and they were to welcome each one. Here I am, indeed.

In these verses, Jesus affirmed the full, integrated and authoritative relationship between the disciples and Jesus and God. Matthew emphasized the ways in which Jesus shared his power and the responsibilities that came with it. One author wrote that this triad of relationships -- the prophets, the righteous, and "little ones" -- might even refer to a specific community. When a description of a group of people begins with prophets and righteous ones, one does not expect the third part in the triad to be "little ones"; Jesus' listeners might have expected him to say "wise ones" or "holy ones" but: little ones? Think, though, about what Jesus' disciples -- then and now -- have been and are asked to do. Prophets: that would have to do with preaching and demonstrating divine power. Righteousness speaks of justice and of healing and restoring relationships. And "little ones" -- a reminder to each one of them that this ministry to which they had been called was completely dependent on God and God's power and presence. This was not something that the disciples could do on their own; their power in their ministry was completely different from any kind of human power.

Sometimes we are called to welcome those close to home. Sometimes we are called to welcome family members and friends. And sometimes we are called to

go far away; sometimes, to welcome the stranger. We may even be called to our own particular Mount Moriah -- some days, we may think that is where we are right now. How is it to say, "Here I am," and to offer a cup of cold water under any of those circumstances? We aren't always required to do heroic things in order to be faithful disciples. And these acts, acts of prophecy, of righteousness, and of being a little one, bind the ones who are welcoming to those who are welcomed.

David Lose wrote that, ". . . the life of faith is composed of a thousand small gestures. Except that, according to Jesus, there is no small gesture." We volunteer a few hours a week at a food bank or for Habitat or at a school, or we spend that time helping a family member or friend or someone we meet on the street. Offering monies from people in this church and others in our Presbytery went together with money given to the whole church to add up to the \$1000 checks that were given to each church in this Presbytery with instructions to give them to groups helping others impacted by the COVID-19 virus. Our Session decided to divide those dollars between the WIC program, SAFE of Columbia County Women's Resource Center, and Fostering Love Kits. Gina will be able to tell us stories of smiles on faces, maybe even show us pictures, of people who suddenly have more dollars with which to help women and children in this area. It will be fun to hear of the difference that 333 dollars and 33 or 34 cents made for these organizations! Here I am, here we are, each of us could say, as Plymouth responds to difficult times right here and right now.

I ran into this story again this week, the story about the man who came upon a bunch of starfish stranded on a beach (the story may be apocryphal, but it makes a point . . .), and he was throwing them back into the sea. When asked why he was doing this, he replied that if they didn't get back in the water soon, they would dry out and die. Looking at hundreds of starfish, his questioner responded that he couldn't possibly hope to make much of a difference. To which the man said, "To the ones I throw back, it makes all the difference in the world." We have the opportunity every day to say, "Here I am," to God who loves us; perhaps one of us or each of us will have the chance this week to share a cup of cold water or to throw a starfish back into the sea: to make all the difference in the world.

Let us pray.