

Here I Am

I was 27 when I began to hear God calling my name. I worked part time in the schools teaching music and part time at the church leading the children's choirs. I had a five year old and a two year old. It was hard to answer "Lord, Here I am" as I added a course load to my full schedule, trusting my husband, Norm, to care for our children because I was away so much with classes. I learned to balance my time so that when I was home I could be with my boys. I'll never forget one night when our family went out for dinner. The boys were happily coloring on the back of their placemats at IHOP while Norm and I caught up on what was going on in our lives. Jacob, who was 4 or 5 at the time, drew a picture with three figures in front of a house. The tallest was definitely his daddy, the red headed boy was Andrew and he was there a tad bit shorter with his dark brown hair. When I asked him, "Where's mommy?" he casually answered, "Oh, Mommy is at seminary". My heart broke in that moment and I began to realize that even though I tried to spend their waking hours when I was home focused on them, I was not the only one who had sacrificed to answer God's call. But they didn't really have a choice. I did. I continued with seminary and graduated when they were 10 and 7. Why? Because as heart breaking as it was to not be there as much as some moms, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that this is what God wanted me to do and I had to answer, "Lord, here I am."

This scripture from Genesis is one of those very hard ones that will always leave us incredibly uncomfortable. Some people say that this is Old Testament and God isn't really like this- Jesus' death and resurrection changed everything and we don't have to be bothered with this story. The Old Testament is irrelevant to Christians, they argue. But I believe that there are some very important lessons for us to learn from Abraham's sacrifice and faith and to dismiss it is to dismiss some very powerful understandings of our relationship with God. At the end of worship, I expect you will still be as uncomfortable with this story as I am, but I hope that you will learn a little more about being in relationship with God, as well.

It's interesting to note that this story has Abraham going about a very difficult task with very little emotion and yet, we are sucked into the drama of the story simply by the hard facts that we hear. There are no tears, no angry remarks at God for asking such an impossible thing, no questioning or whiny words. Even Isaac seems to be remarkably calm as he is bound

by Abraham. We don't hear about him raising a fuss as his dad lifts a knife above his head. But we can't help but add our own emotions into this tale. And then there's God. There's no explanation about why God asks for this sacrifice. There's no understanding about what will be gained. Simply a command.

What we need to remember during this exchange is all that Abraham and God have been through up to this point. For the last 25 years, Abraham had learned some hard lessons about what having faith in God meant and how God is always faithful- even when Abraham was less than faithful. God told Abraham "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abraham left all that he knew and was led out to the countryside to live. Although God had promised to protect Abraham and Sarah, Abraham doubts that promise when confronted with men in the land of Egypt and instead of trusting God to care for them, tells Sarah to lie and pretend to be his sister. This backfires when God punishes Pharaoh for giving goods to Abraham in exchange for his wife Sarah. And Abraham learns to trust God. Then God comes to Abraham and tells him, "A son coming from your own body will be your heir. Look up at the heavens and count the stars- if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be." And even though Abraham and Sarah had no children in their later years, Abraham believed. But time seemed to become short for Abraham and Sarah and so they took matters into their own hands. Abraham and Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, with Sarah's blessing, gave birth to a son, Ishmael, which, understandably, led to many tense family moments. Still God was faithful and agreed to care for Hagar and Ishmael, even as Abraham sent them away. Abraham still struggled to learn the lesson of God's providence as he once again passed Sarah off as his sister rather than his wife to Abimelech, the king of Gerar. God remains faithful by bringing the truth before Abimelech and protecting Abraham and Sarah as the truth of Sarah's identity comes to light. God even reminds Abraham of his promise to bring a great nation from the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham. Soon Isaac was born when Sarah was at that young age of 90 and Abraham was 100. Abraham and Sarah had trouble being faithful to God, but God never gave up being faithful to Abraham and Sarah. When Abraham obeyed God, no matter how hard or unrealistic it seemed, good things happened. When he took matters into his own hands, it never turned out well and took God's divine and faithful will to remedy the situation.

So God calls on Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the one Abraham loved, his only son. And Abraham obeys. This is the final test for Abraham. "Do you trust me?" God seems to ask. And Abraham answers, "yes." Abraham knew that Isaac was the promise not only for he and Sarah, but also for God's continuation of the promised people. A lot rested on this act of faith. A lot rested on this moment of sacrifice. It's interesting how Abraham eludes to the fact that all is well as he leads Isaac away from the servants. Even as he binds Isaac, he still seems to calmly trust that all will be well.

You know, faith is easy when all is well. If Abraham and Sarah had had Isaac early in their marriage with no complications, how would things have turned out differently? Would Abraham have trusted God to make all things right or would he have come to believe that anything he wanted was within his own power to make happen? Would he have learned obedience and trust or would he have turned away from all God had to offer? But that's not how this story plays out. Instead, Abraham learns to be faithful the hard way time and time again. It is only when he is told to sacrifice Isaac that Abraham finally gets it right. He doesn't lie, he doesn't take matters into his own hands or try to fool God by bringing a different sacrifice. He simply obeys.

Faith can lead us to sacrifice. We sacrifice our time, our presence, our gifts and our service to the will of God. And sometimes that leads to some very difficult life lessons. Money is tight and we don't know how we will get through. When one family member has faith and another doesn't, it can lead to broken relationships. Or it can cause us to lose faith and, like Abraham, take matters into our own hands. Work becomes more important than family or time spent with God. And eventually we watch our world crumble around us. As a church body, we can also be fearful of following God. We can fear the recession and choose to limit our budget or be so concerned with facts and figures that we forget that faith can move mountains. Our eyes can close to God's faithfulness and the Holy Spirit can move away from exciting possibilities for our future involvement in the kingdom of God.

Leaving my family and going to seminary was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I'm not very scholarly and I was worried about getting decent grades and passing through higher learning. But my first day on campus, I met Jane who is a professional writer and helped me with my papers. My

husband has stepped into a deeper relationship with our boys because of the time he has spent with them as they have gotten older. It's not the snuggly motherly role I would fill with them, but it's a bond that gives them common ground and mutual love of hobbies and interests. I don't think that would have happened if I had been the primary parent in our house. And most importantly, because of my faith and willingness to answer, "Lord, here I am", I believe that my children have learned a deeper level of empathy for others. When I have to leave for an emergency at church, they give me a hug and a smile of acceptance knowing that I am helping someone who is struggling. And I see them return this to others, as well. They see my faith and they pattern their lives the same way. There is an expectation of living our lives with God as our focus and making hard decisions that honor God. Would they be so faithful if I had not followed where God had led? Do not think this is just because I am ordained, either. All children learn faith or lack of it first from their parents. Our example is the strongest lesson in faith that they can learn.

I wonder if this is the same lesson that Isaac learned at his father's knee. Did Isaac see that inner peace of God and watch his father in prayer? Did Abraham teach him the pattern of faithful living and share his own life lessons of how God was always faithful to their family- regardless of whether they chose God's path or not? God always found a way through the valleys and as long as Abraham lived his life in right relationship with God asking for forgiveness when he chose wrong, God did provide a way. Is that the legacy that Abraham left for his son? Is that the legacy that Abraham leaves for each of us?

One of the things that drew me to this church was the clear and active presence of the Holy Spirit. I was excited to see the faithfulness of the people here as they hired a full time youth director for 20 youth anticipating growth. I continued to see that faithfulness when I was hired as a part time music director anticipating the creation of a full time position and supporting me as I became clergy. I see it today as more and more of our members are actively engaged in the life of the church and the body of Christ here in our community and our world at large. When I first came, committees met sporadically and the same burned out people seemed to be members of all of the committees. Today, few people are on more than one or two committees and each committee has grown to encompass more people representing all the many ways that we are in ministry at church, in the community and in our world, keeping us filled with continuing better ways of

serving God. We have more discipleship groups and Bible Studies that meet regularly and we are growing in our faith journeys together and as individuals. When I first came, there was talk of how we could begin to address the needs of the changing community and begin to engage with those from different cultures here in our own neighborhood. But there were also many fears and a lot of discomfort as to how to break down the language and cultural barriers separating us. Through the prayers of our people and the active work of the Holy Spirit, we are beginning to find ways to be in relationship with one another through the hiring of a position for Hispanic/Latino ministry and I only see that growing as we continue to pray for direction and work on how to focus our energy through setting and achieving goals.

Now comes the hard question. Faith never takes us to some grand moment of fulfillment where we are at the end. Our journey continues until our death here on earth, and, if we have done our jobs well like Abraham, it continues on because of the faith we have shared with others. We see our church growing. We see ways to connect with our community. We see ways to become stronger disciples. Now what? How is God calling our name as Sterling United Methodist Church? Will it require sacrifice? There is a good chance that it will. But will it bless us in unimaginable ways? I believe that is true, as well. Do we have the faith to step out and follow the call? Do we have the faith to trust that God has a vision of growth, energy, relationship, and grace for us and for those we can touch? Will you sacrifice security for faith and trust both in your own life and as a church body? When God calls your name, will you answer: "Lord, here I am."?