

Reflection for Lent II 2015; Sunday March 1
UWI Chapel Anglican Community Morning Eucharist Service
Theme: “Here I Am!”

Prayer:

“God is before us
God is behind us
God’s love around us,
On our right and our left.

God there above us
God there beneath us
God’s might around us,
On our right and our left.

God all about us
God deep within us
God’s peace be with us,
Today and forever.”

(From “On Eagles’ Wings: The Life and Spirit of St. Chad” by David Adam)

Old Testament Reading: Genesis 22: 1-14; the Command to Sacrifice Isaac

“After these things, God tested Abraham...” In the preceding chapter of the book of Genesis, things have been going quite well for Abraham and his clan – Sarah finally conceived and gave birth to Isaac, a property rights dispute over a well is settled with Abimelech, and despite being dismissed by the couple, even Hagar and Abraham’s other offspring Ishmael are taken care of by God in the wilderness. The story of Abraham’s testing in Genesis 22 is a familiar one; God tests Abraham to see if he would be willing to sacrifice that which was undoubtedly most valuable to him – his long-awaited son and heir. The test begins with a call and a response – God calls and Abraham responds, “Here I am!” God then outlines to Abraham the essence of the test – to sacrifice his beloved son – and Abraham sets out in obedience to his Master. In a storyline that surely makes even the most hardened among us cringe, Abraham builds an altar and binds his son there, prepared to do the unthinkable, when another call comes, from the angel of the Lord, and again he responds, “Here I am!” Everyone, especially Abraham and Isaac, can breathe a collective sigh of relief as the story resolves with the sacrifice of a ram in Isaac’s place. As I reflected on this memorable passage, I find myself again challenged, not only by the test, but also by Abraham’s response. ***What does it take for someone when faced with a most difficult test posited by none other than our Almighty God to say, “Here I am!”?***

In seeking to explore this further, I undertook a search of the Scriptures (NRSV) for other situations in which there was a call from the Lord, and the response was “Here I am!” Can you think of any?

In fact, there are some very notable occasions when the response from God's chosen was "Here I am!"

✦ **Genesis 46:1-3: Jacob Brings His Whole Family to Egypt**

46 When Israel set out on his journey with all that he had and came to Beer-sheba, he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. ² God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, "Jacob, Jacob." And he said, "**Here I am.**" ³ Then he said, "I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there."

✦ **Exodus 3:3-5**

³ Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "**Here I am.**" ⁵ Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."

✦ **1 Samuel 3: Samuel's Calling and Prophetic Activity**

3 Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. ***The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.*** ² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; ³ the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

⁴ Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "**Here I am!**" ⁵ and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. ⁶ The LORD called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "**Here I am,** for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ The LORD called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "**Here I am,** for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "**Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'**" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "**Speak, for your servant is listening.**" ¹¹ Then the LORD said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle."

✦ **Isaiah 6:7-9**

⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." ⁸ ***Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'*** And I said, "**Here am I; send me!**"

🚩 Luke 1

³⁵ The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.”

³⁸ Then Mary said, “**Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.**” Then the angel departed from her.

🚩 Acts 9: The Conversion of Saul

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “**Here I am, Lord.**” The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.”

In responding to these calls from God – Abraham to sacrifice his son; Jacob to journey into a likely hostile foreign land; Moses, Samuel and Isaiah to lead and counsel the rebellious people of Israel at different tumultuous points in their history; the Virgin Mary to bear the very Son of God into the world against seemingly insurmountable odds, and Ananias to lay hands on a man named Saul who had been persecuting his people, but who would rise to be a pillar of the Christian Church – what did it take to say, “Here I am!” - and mean it?

Firstly, whether the call came as a primary auditory stimulus or in the context of a vision, as in the cases of Jacob and Ananias, those on the receiving end had to be **listening**. Listening requires being **available** and **open** to the one who is speaking, and the understanding of what is being shared occurs most effectively in the context of relationship. In other words, we hear best when we are truly listening, open and available to someone with whom we are willing to relate. I have shared this story on other occasions with our community, but I feel it is well worth repeating in this context today:

Mother Theresa was once asked about her prayer life.

The interviewer asked, “When you pray, what do you say to God?”

Mother Teresa replied, “I don’t talk, I simply listen.”

Believing he understood what she had just said, the interviewer next asked, “Ah, then what is it that God says to you when you pray?”

Mother Teresa replied, “He also doesn’t talk. He also simply listens.”

Episcopal priest, **Rev. Margaret Guenther** in her book *“The Practice of Prayer”*, in a chapter entitled *“Prayer as Conversation”*, reminds us that prayer is just that – a conversation with God. As such, prayer remains the most critical aspect of our relationship with the Lord – the opportunity not just to present our concerns, but to listen to Him, and to grow in the experiencing of Him in this vital way. Rev. Guenther reminds us too that God is multilingual – far beyond our complete “knowing” of course, but we need to remain open to all the various ways in which He “speaks” – His Word as well as the silence, our dreams and visions, angels and prophets, the latter including those we can easily overlook like the marginalized.

Today, such a prophet of our own time will be buried. **Marlon King** was a paraplegic who spent most of his life in a wheelchair due to a gunshot injury sustained at the tender age of 3 years – an incident which also claimed the life of his mother. There was no stopping the vitality of life in Marlon however, who persisted against all odds in seeking to support not just himself, but his community which grew out of Mona Rehab. He was a talented craftsman who carved beautiful accessory items, and always encouraged those around him, physically challenged or not, to do their best, stay positive and give thanks. I was privileged to meet him many years ago, and in our conversations, he often told me how he respected my Lord, although he was an avowed Rastafarian. We agreed that we served one God, and I consider as precious treasure some crosses he carved for me one Christmas season. His life was snuffed out a few weeks ago while he was attempting to cross Golding Ave, across from the University Hospital. If, in his memory, we promise to try harder to listen to and assist those on the margins, I believe this will be a suitable tribute to one who never allowed his challenges to defeat his spirit. May his soul rest in peace.

My friends, **God is truly multilingual** and we cannot “hear” if we are not listening, open and available to His messages and messengers in all their different forms and contexts. To be able to truly respond when He calls, we must be listening. ***Are we listening?***

Another key characteristic of those who said “Here I am!” in the Scriptures, was a **willingness to say “Yes” to God and His will**, regardless of the personal cost. In each situation we have outlined, God’s disciples had to **let go** and **lay down** their personal wishes or desires, and follow His call and His plan – and they did, with the unanimous outcome of the blessing of God’s children at key points in history. When the response was obedience, to what was always a distinctly individual call in each of our biblical examples, the “Here I am!” decisively impacted not just those of that specific time and place, but succeeding generations of God’s people. With each critical response of “Here I am!” came the fulfillment of the challenge of today’s Gospel (**Mark 8: 31-38**):

³⁴⁻³⁵ *He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them,*

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it...”

On Friday, February 27, the Church remembered **George Herbert, Priest, 1633:**

From Forward Day by Day: “George Herbert was brilliant, wealthy, well-born, handsome, and a favorite of the king and court. To the astonishment of a generation of prominent Englishmen, he abandoned a promising career in public life, took holy orders, and accepted a call to the humble parishes of Fugglestone and Bemerton. As he put it, “Methought I heard one calling, ‘Child.’ And I replied, ‘My Lord.’”

Sisters and brothers, are we listening to God’s Word to us? Are we prepared to deny ourselves, to let go and lay down what we think is the right way, even if it is seemingly good and it is what we are familiar with? Are we prepared to answer a call that may take us outside our comfort zones and even away from those we love and those things which we always thought mattered? Are we willing to respond to God with our own, “Here I am?”

Wherever we are in our spiritual pilgrimage and our relationship with the Lord, whatever our state of preparedness or willingness to consider our answer to His call, unquestionably we cannot answer in our own strength. We must **lean on Him**, and even as we seek to discern what He may be saying to each of us in the “here and now” we continue to take great encouragement from His Word as spoken through the ages. From the New Testament reading for today:

(Romans 8: 31-39):

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

32 He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, **39** nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

It is in the context of a relationship with the all creating, redeeming and sanctifying God that we can grow into and abide in the Agape, and begin to grasp the depth, height and breadth of love that held our Lord on a cross for our sin and our redemption. The Lord Himself bears witness, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love.” (**John 15:9**) – “Dwell in my love”, “abide in my love” – Greek translation “meno”.

It is from this position of relating, dwelling, abiding with Him (“**meno**”) that we can truly begin to contemplate and work out with Him our own “Here I am!”

There was another critical voice that responded “Here I am!” that we have not yet discussed. We return to the books of the prophet Isaiah:

✦ **Isaiah 52: Let Zion Rejoice**

³ **For thus says the LORD:** You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money. ⁴ For thus says the Lord GOD: Long ago, my people went down into Egypt to reside there as aliens; the Assyrian, too, has oppressed them without cause. ⁵ Now therefore what am I doing here, says the LORD, seeing that my people are taken away without cause? Their rulers howl, says the LORD, and continually, all day long, my name is despised.

⁶ **Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here am I.**

✦ **Isaiah 58: False and True Worship**

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

⁹ Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; **you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.** If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

✦ **Isaiah 65, Penultimate chapter: The Righteousness of God’s Judgment**

I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. **I said, "Here I am, here I am,"** to a nation that did not call on my name.

² I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; ³ a people who provoke me to my face continually, sacrificing in gardens and offering incense on bricks;

⁸ Thus says the Lord: As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, "Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it," so I will do for my servants' sake, and not destroy them all.

⁹ I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah inheritors of my mountains; my chosen shall inherit it, and my servants shall settle there.

¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

²⁴ **Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.**

Sisters and brothers, I believe that out of God's enduring and unconditional love for us, He is issuing a call again, to us in this time and season, not only to us as individuals, but in the context of community - our own Chapel community and as the Anglican Togetherness Group. As we avail ourselves of the enduring Lenten disciplines of regular prayer and fasting, let us be asking the Lord to help us to listen and to hear as He speaks in His beautiful and awesome multilingual tones, to dig deep into the reservoirs of courage, strength and Agape that He himself provides, to "meno", and from our position of abiding to answer "Here I am! Speak, Lord, Your servant is listening."

I invite us to reflect on, and pray together verses from Psalm 40 (Book of Common Prayer):

⁷In sacrifice and offering You take no pleasure* (you have given me ears to hear you);

⁸Burnt-offering and sin-offering You have not required,* and so I said, "**Behold, I come.**

⁹In the roll of the book it is written concerning me:* 'I love to do Your will, O my God; Your law is deep in my heart.'"

Amen.

This reflection is a tribute to our brother Marlon King – may his soul rest in peace. Shalom.



Suzanne Shirley-Newnham, February 2015