

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

2 Lent  
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Fr. Bill McGinty

**“Here I Am!”**

The book of Genesis is a tough book, full of stories, of horror and revenge. At times, we find it hard to reconcile the God of Genesis with the “Christian God of Love”. Today’s first lesson, reads like the worst episode of the TV series “Dallas”. Abraham is a big time rancher, with control over thousands of people’s lives, but despite all his mighty wealth, he has no child, no heir, and it weighs heavy upon him. What Abraham does have, however, is faith. He had faith that there is a God, and that there is ‘but one God’, and his God will listen to him and respond to his wishes. God does respond to Abraham’s faith and grants him a child.

In doing so God gives Abraham more than a child, he gives him a future, a family, a nation and a fulfillment of his promise, that Abraham will be the Father of a great nation: “As many as there are stars in the heavens and grains of sand upon the seashore.”

In this weeks story of: “taking Isaac up the mountain” to sacrifice him, Abraham is not just the man who made the covenant with God; he is the Man of the Promise. He represents all of Israel for generations and centuries to come. In today’s story, God is not saying: “I am a mean, jealous and demanding God, kill your son for me.” God is saying: “Are you worthy to be my chosen people? Will you hold true to the faith and trust I have placed in you? Or will you buckle at the first sign of danger and run? Is your faith a ‘what can we get out of this faith, or do you truly love me as your God?’”

And that last sentence is the key to this story. This is not a story about horror or sacrifice; this is a story about love. Abraham has been tested, but so too has God, because this is a test about the covenant bond of love. If Abraham is prepared to give his son for his God, then God too will give his son for his people. In that sense this is a blood oath and we know that with the passing of time, God keeps his promise. He gives us his son that we might evolve into a higher graced state.

Abraham’s response to God: “Here I am!” is echoed down the centuries. Samuel says the same words: “Here I am,” when God calls to him in his sleep. Jesus uses the same words in response to Pilate at his trial: “Here I am.”

In our season of Lent, these have to be our words too. “Here I am.” And I assure you that they are words of faith and words of love. Your daughter is sick in the night and she calls out to you. You rise and go to her bedside and the first words you say are: “Here I am”

If there is one thing we learn in our short problematic lives, is that we don’t and can’t control everything. But when we too cry out in our sickness or desperation to God our Father, the response is always going to be the same: “Here I am”

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God is the parent rushing to our bedside. His response is a response of love and concern. If we have not thought that before, it is because we have allowed ourselves to be remote from our Father, God. We need to admit that we for too long think of God as the CEO of a big, big company. But God is not J.R. Ewing. Jesus teaches us that God is Abba, God is Father, God is the Dad who plays with us on the seashore. If you want an image of God to pray to, and to love, then let me give you one. Close your eyes and think of your own father. Can you see him? His eyes a twinkle, the smile on his face? Can you remember how your hand felt in his? How he longed to teach you things that he knew would help you when he was no longer around?

On the last summer of my Father's life we returned to Ireland, just the two of us, on a fishing trip. One day we decided to visit my Mother's grave high on the hill above the town. There we stood father and son with the whole of Derry stretched out before us, and the silver ribbon of the River Foyle winding through the Donegal hills to the sea and gentle Peggy in her grave resting at our feet. In that moment, all his lifetime memories came flooding back, and the great expanse and meaning of his life took shape before his eyes. Suddenly, we were no longer father and son, but we were friends and companions on a much greater journey that went far beyond life and death. On that day, standing there on the heights of Sheriff's Mountain we seemed to make our own covenant with each other. He placed his hand upon my shoulder as if he was passing on a legacy. I patted him reassuringly on the back as if to say: "Good job." It was hard to tell, who was Father and who was son. Then he was gone.

When Jesus tells me: "God is my Father," "God is Abba," I think of my Father because it makes God more real for me. I see the wrinkles and crows feet around his eyes, as his face lights up in a smile. I see his silver grey moustache and his bronzed complexion and his Santa Claus red, rosy cheeks. I don't think God mines, because it brings him very near and then I believe those words: "Here I am." Think of God as Father, and you do have a companion on the road of life. Think of God as Father and you are standing on a mountain shoulder to shoulder with his hand resting upon you. Think of God as Father and you want to pat him gently on the back and say: "Good job." Think of God as Father and you do love him and more than some.

St Paul in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today, asks the question: "If God is for us, who is against us?" For God gave us his Son who died for us? Do you now think that he will now abandon us? God can no more abandon us than he can stop loving Jesus. For God too stood with his Son on a mountain and made a solemn covenant that he would not abandon us and God's son did die that we might live. Paul tells us that kind of love is such a bond, that neither hardship, distress, sickness, persecution or even death itself can ever separate us from the love of Christ.

Poor Peter, in the Gospel he opens his mouth at the wrong time to rebuke Jesus, little knowing that he is dealing with the life and death struggle of the Universe. Little does he know that Jesus is talking about the greatest battle in the history of God. "Can love defeat death?"

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What does Jesus mean when he says “If you want to become my followers, you must deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me?”

Surely, it is that we too have to place love and sacrifice as our highest priorities. As parent we understand that because we do it for our children all the time. Yet Jesus’ instruction is wider than that. We must make love and sacrifice the most important thing in our lives when it comes to everyone around us. I am not talking about people in far off lands that we do not know, I am talking about Lucie Brooks, Hank Radcliffe, Kathie Rusanski, Maryann McGinty, Jane Herrington, Janine Vernon, Linda Troise. These are the brothers and sisters Jesus has given us to love. These are the people we too must be prepared to lay our life down for. These are the people who we should be prepared to run to their side and say: “Here I am.”

This afternoon I journey to Northampton on the Clergy Retreat. On that Retreat I will be praying for each and every one of you, especially our sick.

Retreats have never been the same since November 27, 1988. I was on a Clergy Retreat three hundred miles away from home. It was 10:00am and we were preparing to for the Eucharist. A nun came into the room and called my name. There was a telephone call. My Father had died.

As I returned to the Eucharist my fellow priests began to sing the first hymn. It could have been any hymn, but instead it was my favorite hymn and the words rang out:

“Blessed be the Lord, Blessed be the Lord  
The God of Mercy, the God who saves.  
I will not fear, the dark of night  
Nor the arrow that flies by day

Although a thousand men have fallen at my side;  
I’ll not be shaken with the Lord at hand,  
His faithful arm is all the armor that I need  
To fight my battle with the foe.”

Today St Paul’s letter amplifies those words, when he tells us: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.

That love should live in our hearts this Lent, on our journey to Easter. We should take that love and place it in the hearts of all those we encounter in this place, where God dwells with us and tells us on a daily basis: “Here I am!”

Amen+

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