

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House  
June 26, 2011

Sermon Notes: ©2011 Ray Bagnuolo  
A little longer than usual...

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Here I am.

God calls to Abraham and Abraham says, "Here I am."

From there the text gets difficult and worse. If you consider the possibility of God ever calling upon anyone to sacrifice his or her son; or God testing faithful people in such a way, especially after their only other son had died a year before - then God emerges in very bad light. You are welcome to believe what you will, but this is not the God I know.

So what's up with the text?

There are some interpreters who have suggested that Abraham was, in fact, a little crazed. His grief and advanced age had caused him to lose his senses (he is said to have died when he was 912). They suggest that he was not hearing God, but his own declining mind. Some interpreters suggest that it was his wife who in horror and fear followed a befuddled and obsessed Abraham as he took their son Isaac off to the mountain to be slain and with only seconds to spare called out from behind a rock nearby, in her best God-like voice, to stop the sacrifice of her son...the one she had never believed she would have.

Well, we don't know. Such are the stories that emerge to try and make sense of this passage. It's best we look more...

So, if we are to let go of the literal interpretation of the text, a text that was written many, many years after the time in which these things are said to occur, then where are we?

Like the story of Job and others, these are tough texts, especially if we embrace a loving, all powerful and all-knowing God. In some ways, these texts define a God that seemed much more human - than the one we may think of today. And for those in the ancient times - well, as we have said before, God *was* and *was into* everything...or as we used to say in Italian: Prezzemolo per ogni minestra - like the parsley in the pasta - into everything!

So from a distant lens and a glass through which we see darkly, as Paul says, and from among the many discussions on this text and exegesis - it is the idea of "Here I Am" that resonates. The "I trust you. Absolutely. God, here I am, what will you have me do?"

There is some thought that Abraham so trusted God that he never believed God would ask him to actually take Isaac's life. This view hinges on one part of the text, the part

where Isaac asks his father where the sacrifice is. Abraham's response that "God would provide" and in fact a ram is later provided. That's a little better, perhaps...

But another problem arises here in this "a bit too anthropomorphic-like God": What if Abraham had refused what God had asked? If God's plan depended on Abraham's trust – then there has to be some trust on the part of God that Abraham would do what God asked.

This line of thinking suggests an interesting partnership between God and Abraham. It brings up this notion we still deal with today, the relationship of God's will for us and our free will to accept it. It seems it was as messy to the writers of Genesis hundreds of years after the events – as it is sometimes for us today.

As you can see, there are many directions in which we can take the text; for me – whatever the direction – it seems to be about trust. Trusting in God. Here I am. God trusting in us. The I Am that is always with us.

The theme is recurring...

Throughout the Bible, the call of God and the willingness of people and nations to respond have been the mileposts on the path of God's unveiling plan. Noah, Moses, the nation of Israel, Abraham, Elijah, the Prophets, Jesus...

Even Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer found, questioned beyond his ability to compromise his beliefs, at one point simply said: "Here I stand. I can do no other." I stand before God. Do what you will. I trust in God and God trusts in me to stand here. Right here.

Over the last fifteen or so years of my time in the Presbyterian Church and the nearly six years since I have been ordained and serving churches and congregations, I have come to know many who live deeply in the trust that God walks with them; people who are willing to stand that ground no matter the risk.

They are among the freest people I know.

Before my time in the PC(USA) the just and loving treatment of people of color and women had finally broken through the barriers that had existed, some of which continue to rear their ugly heads from time to time. However, when such incidents occur, there is a great and strong voice that speaks out, rejects such positions, and takes action. Stands.

However in my time, the church's treatment of people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender has been abysmal, intolerable, biased, and fomenting of violence. It is a church that has too often run or run silent. Good for a submarine. Bad for witness to the gospel.

I have been to ecclesiastical trials, with friends and colleagues forced to defend themselves from charges related to welcoming the LGBT community in its fullness –

many of whom simply left, chased away by intolerance, lack of understanding, and dogmatic conviction that served more to assuage the comfort of those bringing charges than actual justice.

I have watched qualified candidate after candidate be denied a call because they self-identified as someone who was LGBT, refusing to deny their love for another of the same gender; told time and again that they were welcome – but only so far, and certainly not in leadership.

For many who suffer, feel excluded, oppressed, have been abused or pushed aside – the church has always been a hope for sanctuary. Look who Jesus called to himself. The oppressed and marginalized, and look how he himself was oppressed – to the point of execution. Sorry, no one can tell me that God wants ever again for anyone that which Jesus suffered through for all. All. All. All.

Yet when it comes to the institution of “church” and “houses of worship” only a small but growing minority have opened their doors fully to the LGBT community, often at risk to their rights of jurisdiction of their church or their careers.

Like many here, I lived through the beginnings of the AIDS crisis. It has been part of my adult life since the early 1980’s. I have watched friends, dozens of friends die – and an entire cohort of men of my generation wiped out by the tens of thousands. I lived through the confusion and fear of not knowing what was going on – what was going to happen, and while the president in office from 1980-1988 never used the word AIDS once from the bully pulpit of the presidency, never stepped up since he saw it as a problem of *those* people, a problem of their own making – those of us in the community need to turn elsewhere.

Yes, there were churches who stepped up, for many who came to know us the their compassion changed some of their hearts, among them have been some of the strongest advocates, allies, and supporters of the LGBT community. Still, as I listened to the comments of some of the religious leaders during the recent debate over the Marriage Equality Act in Albany, as a gay man – I easily recognized that fear and homophobia that had been targeted toward me and others for decades, a hatred and fear in the hands of religious leaders – alive, vibrant, and just as deadly as ever.

But there were some, many, who knew that the AIDS pandemic was not God’s purge. Who knew that people who identified as gay in its broad sense were not evil, damned, or somehow more flawed than anyone else. Some of these people who had the courage, chutzpah, and yes anger to refuse not to stand trusted in God and trusted that God would stand by them. They faced red-faced blustering people, hearings, threats of losing their jobs.

In spite of it, they sat with people who were suffering from the abuse and marginalization of their communities and families; they stood and stood and refused to go away – readied

to be carried away. They pastured, counseled, and buried those others never knew but were quick and ready to dehumanize.

They stayed and prayed and presented themselves so all could see...and slowly the change of hearts began...

Today, 40 years after Sandy Brawders stepped out on the floor of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church and identified herself as a Candidate for Minister of Word and Sacrament – who was also a lesbian, forty years after her statement and that night when they needed to place guards at her hotel door for the death threats she received – forty years later, after years of legislation and work by thousands - this church finally changed its constitution so today Sandy could have been ordained, so today those who come forward can be open, honest – and ordained. And sanctuary is a bit closer...

And last Friday, forty years after the Stonewall Riots of 1969, when the gay community finally had enough of the incessant raids by police just a few miles away from here in Greenwich Village – they stood, boy did they stand...and the Gay Rights Movement begun. Forty years later, we in this State finally have the Marriage Equality Act – important for those who wish to marry, yes, more important as another major rejection of the LGBT community as second class citizens to be marginalized, oppressed, and the targets of abuse and violence – for any form of exclusion breeds violence.

Yet, controversy continues in the PC(USA) and other churches. In February, The Rev. Dr. Janie Spahr who many of you know and may have met here earlier this year, will take her case to the highest court in the PC(USA), the GAPJC, who will hear her appeal of a guilty verdict, upheld by a lower court of appeals – a court that charged her with violating her ordination vows for marrying same gender loving couples in San Francisco during a time when it was legal to do so. Janie continues to stand for her call to ordination that sees refusal to not marry same gender loving couples as a violation to her ordination vows, not the other way around. And, I agree.

So, here we are, in a State with no residency laws for marriage, the right to marry, and an influx of weddings already in the works – and who are the religious leaders that will marry them. Who are the churches that have rejected and second class or second spiritual status for those seeking to solemnize the vows? Who are the churches that stand with God knowing God stands with them and are willing to lift up love in ways of marriage?

The struggle continues. Some will shrink from it – others will enter into it to help find a way out toward the New Jerusalem in which all are welcomed as they always have been by God.

Like Sandy, Janie, the Stonewall folk, and yes Abraham, Martin and others – we stand. We trust in God. We trust that God stands with us. We set our sights high enough to see beyond the institutional bias and confusion – knowing clearly some things:

Among them:

That we are all beautiful, radiant, loving creations of God  
That God would never call us to marginalization of one another  
That God could never ask violence of us toward those we are called to love  
And, that like before – justice is always right, it is always love in action – it is  
always the gospel in practice...even when others disagree, for they are wrong.

The story of Abraham is a story of trust. I wish it had been told differently. But its point is clear: our first responsibility is to trust in God and know that God has trust in us.

And it is “us” in community that is called to live into love of God and one another that the best of churches and faith traditions exemplify.

A place like this and others like this that challenges us to follow. Challenges us to set aside what needs to be set aside, making it clear that here we stand. It is here in the trust of God and God’s trust of us, that we say in all the ways we can say:

Here I am. What will you have me do?

And then do it.