

"Hineini: Here I Am" Rev. Michele Ward July 2, 2023
Genesis 22:1-14 Ordinary Time Year A Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church Baltimore, MD

HEBREW BIBLE READING Genesis 22:1-14 (NRSVUE)

The morning's reading comes from the Book of Genesis.
Listen now for a Word from God.

After these things God tested Abraham. God said to him, "Abraham!"
And he said, "*Here I am.*"

God said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.

On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."

Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

And the two of them walked on together. Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "*Here I am, my son.*"

Isaac said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

And the two of them walked on together. When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order.

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He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "*Here I am.*"

The angel of the Lord said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide," as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

All: Thanks be to God.

PRAYER

SERMON

This morning, we will travel to a galaxy far, far away to Cloud City on the gas planet Bespin in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). Darth Vader, the leader of the Galactic Empire, makes a deal with Lando Calrissian, the mayor of Cloud City. If Lando turns over Han Solo, Chewbacca, and Leia Skywalker, Cloud City will have the protection of the Imperial Army. This will keep the economy and the society of Cloud City going. They can stay independent and their

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customers can maintain their privacy. The inhabitants will be safe.

Lando can keep his commitments. All he has to do is convince his friends to go with him, keep his cool, and they will never know something is amiss. Lando's plan works. They do not suspect him until it is too late for them to escape. Lando leads them straight into a room where Darth Vader is waiting for their arrival.

Lando Calrissian tells them: "Things have developed that have ensured security. I've just made a deal that will keep the Empire out of here forever. I had no choice. They arrived right before you did. I'm sorry."¹ Lando believes it is the best way to keep the peace in Cloud City. He thinks he is being a faithful leader by ensuring the continued independence from trade requirements and mining guilds. Compromises must be made to keep the wheels turning in Cloud City and to maintain his status as mayor. Even if it means betraying one of his oldest friends, Han Solo, and his companions, Chewbacca and Leia, who have all come looking for protection.

Lando Calrissian justifies the betrayal by telling them that Darth Vader cornered him before Han Solo even showed up, and he

¹*Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). Directed by Irvin Kershner. Produced by Lucasfilms Ltd. Distributed by 20th Century Fox.

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had to make the deal. He tells them he had no agency whatsoever.

All Lando could do was say yes.

Lando Calrissian reminds me of Abraham in today's passage. Lando and Abraham don't seem to believe they have other options besides responding, "yes." Abraham does not question God's command to sacrifice Isaac, even though he would have known that the God he worshiped did not require child sacrifice. If Abraham had taken a moment to reflect, he would have remembered that the god Moloch, worshiped by other nearby communities, required child sacrifice. Instead, Abraham agrees to kill Isaac, his only son. Sarah has no presence whatsoever in this narrative. In other exchanges that involve Isaac, Sarah plays a role. She does not exist in this account at all.

Abraham put up more of a fight over the destruction of Sodom and Gemmorah when God told him that no one righteous lived there and they all deserved to die. This time, Abraham does not lobby a single protest against God's command to take away Isaac's life. Think about the lies that Abraham had to tell himself, his servants, and his son in order to convince himself this was the right

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choice. He had to lie to his wife, his servants, his son, and himself in order to do what he did all while maintaining a calm exterior for three days while they traveled into the wilderness. I wonder if the rabbi that speaks of Abraham failing God's test might be onto something. Rabbi Hyim Shafner argues, "The real test was for Abraham to confront God as he did at Sodom, thus teaching his children "righteousness and justice" and ultimately to say "no" to God."²

He goes on to say that "perhaps, on some level in the narrative ... Abraham failed the test ... This is why God never speaks to Abraham after commanding him to take Isaac as a burnt offering."³ God does not speak to Abraham after this. An angel comes to stop Abraham from sacrificing Isaac. God won't do it. *The real test was not to see if Abraham was faithful enough to God to sacrifice Isaac. The real test was to believe that God would fulfill God's original promise to Abraham and Sarah through Isaac.* Instead, Abraham

²"Did Abraham Fail His Final Test?" Rabbi Hyim Shafner, *Jewish Journal*, October 12, 2010. Accessed June 29, 2023. <https://jewishjournal.com/news/83691/>

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gives in to his fear. He does not believe that God will make them the
parents of many nations.

The irony of Abraham repeatedly saying "Here I am," as if he is fully present and attentive, ready and willing to act, is that he continually misses the cues. The phrase "Here I am," in Hebrew translates to "*Hineni* (הִנְנִי)." This phrase "reflects on the ability to pray with humility and sincerity, while fearing that one is unworthy of the task ... *Hineni* [means] "I am ready" or "I am prepared" ... "I am present ... [I am] paying close attention to what is being asked of me."⁴ If he had been paying close attention, he would have told God no in the first place. *Saying "I am here" does not always mean saying yes. Sometimes saying "I am here" means saying no to God.* Every time Abraham says "Hineni," I want to hear more from him. I want him to "see what is unfolding around him" ... but it seems as if "he is not really ready to confront it."⁵

⁴"*Hineni*: "I am ready" and "I am prepared,"" Adina Davies, Boston-area Jewish Education Program, blogpost, September 17, 2018. Accessed June 29, 2023. [Hineni: "I am ready" and "I am prepared" - Boston-area Jewish Education Program](#)

⁵"*Hineni*: "I am ready" and "I am prepared,"" Adina Davies, Boston-area Jewish Education Program, blogpost, September 17, 2018. Accessed June 29, 2023. [Hineni: "I am ready" and "I am prepared" - Boston-area Jewish Education Program](#)

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This week has been one of historic losses. The Supreme Court rules in favor of a web designer in Colorado who refuses to create designs communicating messages the designer finds offensive. They also struck down the Biden Administrations student-loan forgiveness plan, saying that Congress did not give the secretary of education the authority to forgive borrowers' debts to that level. And, in another blow, the Supreme Court strikes down affirmative action programs in the college admissions process, but does not stop legacy enrollment from giving predominantly white students an advantage over other students.⁶ The Supreme Court rulings are like Lando Calrissian turning over the Rebel Alliance. They are like Abraham holding the knife above Isaac, bound on the altar. The deep fear and hatred that runs through these opinions hurts us all. God does not call us towards hatred and discrimination, and yet these opinions do just that. The Supreme Court Justices who ruled in favor of bigotry and racism, say "Hineni," say "I am here," to a different God, to a false God that lives off of fear. God does not call us to deep hatred of the people who are different from us. God does

⁶"A Day At the Court," <https://www.scotusblog.com/> June 29 and June 30, 2023 Opinion Analysis. Accessed June 30, 2023.

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not call us to blindly follow, no matter who or what the consequences may be. Lando did not need to align with the Galactic Empire. Abraham did not need to sacrifice Isaac. We did not need to sacrifice our LGBTQ siblings and their legal protections. We did not need to withhold \$400 billion of student loan debt forgiveness. We did not need to overturn affirmative action practices. When God comes to us, God comes to us as the ram in the thicket. God comes to us as the angel, imploring us to stop hurting ourselves and the ones in our care. When God calls us, when we say "Hineni," we say it when we are afraid. When we are uncertain. When we do not know the outcome. We step into the fear, not away from it.