

Year A

Genesis 12:1-4a

During the US civil war Abraham Lincoln met with a group of ministers for a prayer breakfast. Lincoln was not a church-goer but was a man of deep, if at times unorthodox, faith. At one point one of the ministers said, “Mr President, let us pray that God is on our side”. Lincoln’s response showed far greater insight, “No, gentlemen, let us pray that we are on God’s side.”

Lincoln reminded those ministers that religion is not a tool by which we get God to

do what we want but an invitation to open ourselves to being and doing what God wants. And God wants the world to be blessed through the obedience of his followers.

Abram was living in the city of Haran when he encountered God in this extraordinary way. Haran is located in present day Turkey and the name means *highway* or *crossroads*. That is very appropriate considering the personal crossroads where Abram found himself, at this point in his life. The passage in Genesis has a simple, poetic flow to it. It gives the impression of a straightforward

encounter between God and Abram and an easy decision for Abram but I'm sure that was far from the case. Just like all of us, Abram would have been wrestling with many different things in his life.

In the freezing waters around Greenland are countless icebergs, some little and some gigantic. If you'd observe them carefully, you'd notice that sometimes the small ice floes move in one direction while their massive counterparts flow in another. The explanation is simple. Surface winds drive the little ones, whereas the huge masses of ice are carried along by deep ocean currents.

When we face trials and tragedies, it's helpful to see our lives as being subject to two forces--surface winds and ocean currents. The winds represent everything changeable, unpredictable, and distressing. But operating simultaneously with these gusts and gales is another force that's even more powerful. It is the sure movement of God's wise and sovereign purposes, the deep flow of His unchanging love.

Sometimes we might not discern the difference between the two types of force and become confused. I often hear people ask how they can possibly know the will of God

for their lives. How do you know if you've taken the correct direction in life? It's interesting that that kind of question is not found in the critical engagement between God and Abram in Genesis. It simply says that Abram went and that was enough for God to bless him. I sometimes wonder if we fret too much over the choices that we make rather than focus on the way in which choices are made. It is the attitude of Abram that is so impressive here and we mustn't miss that.

In 1983 my parents were faced with a difficult choice. My father's job was coming

to an end in Northern Ireland and he could either accept redundancy or accept a new position in Glasgow. All of our families were in Northern Ireland, we had no connection with Scotland but my father had potentially another twenty years of working life ahead. I don't recall that there was a lot of painful to-ing and fro-ing over the options but instead my parents reflected on the need to be positive and to make the most of a crossroads. And I was very impressed by that in hindsight because at the time I couldn't see beyond the decision. I didn't want to leave my family and friends behind.

I was bogged down by the decision whilst mum and dad sat easy with it. And that allowed them to make a good decision.... There was no hint of a complaining or reluctant Abram here in the text. He did not question his pedigree or credentials but instead he got up and went. Throughout Scripture there is a sense that the one who calls is the one who equips. It is God who does the enabling and the skills of the one called are neither here nor there. The important element is the call itself. And that links us through to the Gospel reading today when a tentative, enquiring Pharisee called

Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. He was clearly longing for direction and purpose. He was maybe wondering if he was good enough to receive God's grace. He was maybe wondering if he had the necessary gifts and talents to be of any use to God. And it was not until he would later submit to God's call and simply obey that he would find the answer.

It is also important to note that God's purposes have world-wide implications. "All families of the earth shall be blessed" through you, Abram! The big ice-bergs of God's intention for the world have a steady,

unstoppable force about them. From this early promise made to one man many promises have come to others that are a further working out of this great plan and purpose. In that sense, the life changing encounter with Nicodemus fits in with the promises made to Abraham.

The BBC news website ran an article on the American missionary Jim Elliot at the end of February.¹ His, was an amazing story. January 2, 1956, was the day that 29-year-old Jim Elliot had waited for most of his life. He jumped out of bed, dressed as quickly as

¹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/video_and_audio/features/magazine-39039876/39039876

he could, and got ready for the short flight over the thick Ecuador jungle. Almost three years of jungle ministry and many hours of planning and praying had led Jim to this day. Within hours, he and four other missionaries would be setting up camp in the territory of a dangerous and uncivilized Indian tribe known then as the Aucas (Ow-cuz), known now as the Waodani (Wah-o-dah-nee). The Aucas had killed all outsiders ever caught in their area. Even though it was dangerous, Jim Elliot had no doubt God wanted him to tell the Aucas about Jesus.

On February 2, 1952, Jim Elliot waved goodbye to his parents and boarded a ship for the 18-day trip from San Pedro, California to Quito (Kee-toe), Ecuador, South America.

He and his missionary partner, Pete Fleming, first spent a year in Quito learning to speak Spanish. Then they moved to Shandia (Shandee-ah), a small Quichua (Kee-chew-wah) Indian village to take the place of the retiring missionary. Jim and Pete studied hard to learn the language and fit in. Their hard work paid off; in six months, both were speaking Spanish well enough to move to

Shandia. When they arrived in Shandia, they also had to learn the speech of the Quichuas.

Three years later many Quichuas had become faithful Christians. Jim now began to feel it was time to tell the Aucas about Jesus.

The Aucas had killed many Quichuas. They had also killed several workers at an oil company-drilling site near their territory. The oil company closed the site because everyone was afraid to work there. Jim knew the only way to stop the Aucas from killing was to tell them about Jesus. Jim and the four other

Ecuador missionaries began to plan a way to show the Aucas they were friendly.

Nate Saint, a missionary supply pilot, came up with a way to lower a bucket filled with supplies to people on the ground while flying above them. He thought this would be a perfect way to win the trust of the Aucas without putting anyone in danger. They began dropping gifts to the Aucas. They also used an amplifier to speak out friendly Auca phrases. After many months, the Aucas even sent a gift back up in the bucket to the plane. Jim and the other missionaries felt

the time had come to meet the Aucas face-to-face.

One day while flying over Auca territory, Nate Saint spotted a beach that looked long enough to land the plane on. He planned to land there and the men would build a tree house to stay safe in until friendly contact could be made.

The missionaries were flown in one-by-one and dropped off on the Auca beach. Nate Saint then flew over the Auca village and called for the Aucas to come to the beach. After four days, an Auca man and two

women appeared. It was not easy for them to understand each other since the missionaries only knew a few Auca phrases. They shared a meal with them, and Nate took the man up for a flight in the plane. The missionaries tried to show sincere friendship and asked them to bring others next time.

For the next two days, the missionaries waited for other Aucas to return. Finally, on day six, two Auca women walked out of the jungle. Jim and Pete excitedly jumped in the river and waded over to them. As they got closer, these women did not appear friendly. Jim and Pete almost immediately heard a

terrifying cry behind them. As they turned they saw a group of Auca warriors with their spears raised, ready to throw. Jim Elliot reached for the gun in his pocket. He had to decide instantly if he should use it. But he knew he couldn't. Each of the missionaries had promised they would not kill an Auca who did not know Jesus to save himself from being killed. Within seconds, the Auca warriors threw their spears, killing all the missionaries: Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, Nate Saint, Pete Fleming and Jim Elliot.

Late in the afternoon of Sunday, January 8, Elisabeth Elliot, Jim's wife, waited by the

two-way radio to hear Nate Saint and his wife discuss how things had gone that day. But there was no call. As evening turned to night, the wives grew worried. They knew the news was not good.

The next morning another missionary pilot flew over the beach to look for the men. He saw only the badly damaged plane on the beach.

News quickly spread around the world about the five missing missionaries. A United States search team went to the beach, found the missionaries' bodies, and buried them.

But don't think Operation Auca ended there, because it didn't. In less than two years Elisabeth Elliot, her daughter Valerie, and Rachel Saint (Nate's sister) were able to move to the Auca village. Many Aucas became Christians. They are now a friendly tribe. Missionaries, including Nate Saint's son and his family, still live among the Aucas today.²

You know, the obedience of the Elliots and their friends is of the same order as Abram as the call that went to the Elliots and the others is of the same order as God's call to Abram. The challenge for us today is not to

² <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/church-history-for-kids/jim-elliott-no-fool-11634862.html>

find ourselves paralysed by a choice but
instead to find freedom in obedience.