

CHOOSING BETWEEN FAITH & FEAR

Trusting God with Opportunity, Difficulty, and Change

A 3-week series: June 18 – July 2, 2017

St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Greenville, S.C.



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The Lord appeared under the oak trees in the heat of the day. Without so much as a breeze, the only sound was the singing of grasshoppers. When the men appeared, Abraham bowed in respect and offered water. He shouted for Sara to quickly bake some cakes for them, and hastily grabbed a tender calf for the slave to roast on the fire. Abraham spread a feast of curds and milk, grilled meat and hot cakes, and stood ready to serve as the other men ate.



Was it fear or faith that prompted Abraham? Was he afraid of these three strangers who showed up with unknown motives? Or was he faithfully honoring the unwritten code of hospitality for sojourners? We know that Abraham had a lot to lose—a herd, a home, a wife.

The Lord appeared again under the oak trees in the heat of the day. Without so much as a breeze, the only sound was the singing of grasshoppers. When the men appeared, James bowed in respect and offered water. He shouted for Daphne to quickly bake some bread for them, and hastily grabbed a tender calf to roast on the fire. James spread a feast of grilled meat and hot biscuits, fresh butter and whipped cream, and stood ready to serve as the other men ate.

The difference between Abraham and James is that James was a slave. He and his wife, Daphne, were both owned by Pierce Butler in South Georgia, where they served under the moss-laden oak trees in the heat of the day. Was it fear or faith that prompted James and Daphne to serve? As slaves, they lived with incredible fear. As believers in Jesus Christ, they lived with incredible faith. Unlike Abraham and Sara, they had *nothing to lose*, for they were as poor as the sandy soil of the coastal islands.

“Where is your wife?” the men asked. Sweat trickled from Abraham’s brow and into the corner of his eye with a sharp sting. Was it fear or the heat of the day? Sarah hid behind the tent flap and listened carefully. One of the strangers said he would come back to their home and Sarah would have a son. Was it a promise or a threat?

Sweat trickled from James’ brow and into the corner of his eye with a sharp sting. Was it fear or the heat of the day? Daphne pushed with all her strength and delivered their eleventh child. Anna Alexander was born last and least of all in a newly, *barely* freed household. So was this a promise or a threat?

Sarah laughed to herself. Look, when you’re too old, you *do* laugh at the idea of having a baby! We also laugh at other preposterous ideas of changing our established ways. Just know that this laughter *always* sounds like an insult to God. Know that God is shrugging at our stubbornness, and asking, “Is anything too wonderful for me to pull off?” And our lying, cheating hearts are just like Sarah’s: “No, no, no, no, Lord. I wasn’t laughing at *You!*” The One “to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and *from whom* no secrets are hid” is going to speak these biblical words: “Oh yes you did laugh!” Like Sarah, we are busted...and still loved *anyway!*

Oh yes you did laugh!

Genesis 18:15

James and Daphne Alexander may have felt busted. They lived in the poorest, most vulnerable situation imaginable when Anna was born, and became yet another burden on an already large family. Like every newborn infant, Anna represented a God-given promise. And like every family struggling to survive, a new mouth to feed represents an economic threat.

Notice where these two stories intersect. Abraham and Sarah had *everything*...but a child of their own. James and Daphne had absolutely nothing...but their children. And yet the choice they faced under the oak trees boiled down to this: Can we trust God with our opportunities and our difficulties? Can we trust God when our lives are about to change...*again?*

The simple, yet difficult choice for them (and for us) is between fear and faith. Will we run, hide, attack, blame, hoard, curse, and withdraw in fear? Or will we stand, with open hearts and minds and arms, with enough courage to acknowledge our fears and remain deeply committed to the miraculous promise of Love *anyway?*

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Like the Psalmist and like blessed Anna Alexander of South Georgia it takes courage to proclaim, “O Lord, I am your servant; I am *your* servant and the child of your handmaid; you have freed me from my bonds.” This gift of faith and courage inspired Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist to sing these words: “*Blessed be the Lord, the God who swore an oath to our father Abraham, to set us free...free to worship Him without fear...all the days of our Life.*”

So, what is *your song* of faith...of deep commitment to the powerful, frightening, life-changing promises of God? Faith is not a slogan, or a bunch of plabum with hints for happy living. Faith is the deep, twisting canyon of uncertainty that makes you feel so small, along with the mysterious courage you need to keep walking and searching around the next bend. Faith is doubting that you're strong enough to face your fears, but just doing it anyway.



Thank God for the Episcopal Church! Some, though not all, of our forebears recognized blacks as human beings when this simple truth was unpopular and even rejected. The Episcopal Church baptized blacks into the household when others would not. The Episcopal Church ordained black men *before* the Civil War even began. Most shocking of all, the Episcopal Church in Georgia ordained Anna Alexander as a deaconess in 1907, long before she was even eligible to vote as a full citizen of our country.

You see, the Lord appeared under the oak trees in the heat of the day in May, 1907. Bishop C.K. Nelson consecrated Anna as an ordained deaconess. She was possibly the first ordained African-American woman in the country, and definitely the first in the south. So, was this a promise or a threat? *Yes!*

In the middle of a time and place filled with hate, she rejected hate. In a society that was disrespectful, she demanded *and gave* respect. In a society that was miserably poor, she opened wide her congregation's hand to those who were even more poor. (Her mission was recognized as the most proportionately generous congregation in the whole diocese.) In a society that was ignorant, she built a school for children that the state left behind. No child was ever turned away, even when they couldn't pay the fee—a nickel a week. In a society that was segregated, racist, and fearful, she saw how hunger and illness do not discriminate—and she gave freely to anyone in need. Dr. Jan Saltzgaber has shared these and other powerful insights in a biography on the Diocese of Georgia web site that I commend to you.

For purposes of this sermon what I want you to see is this: In the case of Abraham and Sarah, with so much to lose, it was impossible to see the difference between a promise and a threat. In the case of James and Daphne Alexander, with *nothing* left to lose, it was impossible to see the difference between a promise and a threat. In the case of Bishop Nelson, ordaining a poor black southern woman, it was impossible to see the difference between a promise and a threat.

In the case of you and me, who fall somewhere between these extremes, it is still not possible to tell the difference between a promise and a threat. After all, we sometimes receive *promising* opportunities that threaten our established or comfortable lives. At the same time we also experience *threatening* situations that sometimes lead us to more promising, healthy, and faithful lives.

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Sometimes opportunities come to us dressed up like difficulties. Sometimes the promise of God's love comes to us dressed up like a threat. After all, Jesus came to us, looking and sounding like a radical threat. It is what got him crucified.

Genesis 18:1-15
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8, 9-23

And this choice repeats itself to us over and over again...fear or faith? Cut and run...or stand up and persevere? Attack or reconcile? Curse or bless? Blame or lead? Look, if it was easy, everybody would be doing it.

Jesus was right: "the harvest *is* plentiful, but the laborers are few." Faith is hard. Commitment is hard. Uncertainty is hard. Generosity is hard. Perseverance is hard. Forgiveness is hard. Following Jesus *is hard*.

Here's what St. Paul tried to teach the Romans *and us*: We can "boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us *because* God's love has been poured into our hearts."

God called Abraham and Sarah to make changes and follow, despite their fears. Jesus called twelve apostles to make changes and follow, despite their fears. Christ called James and Daphne, slaves, to make changes and follow. Christ called their daughter, Deaconess Alexander, to face *her* fears and follow. And Christ calls you and me to reject fear, choose faith, and follow.

The bad news is that it is really hard to do. And our faith is not strong enough to do it. But the Good News is found in our opening collect. You can find it on your lesson sheet. The Good News is that the steadfast faith and love of God *is strong enough...for all of us...to follow*.

So, then, let us pray together with an emphasis on the word "your": "Keep, O LORD, *your* household the Church in *your* steadfast faith and love, that through *your* grace we may proclaim *your* truth with boldness, and minister *your* justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."

Amen.

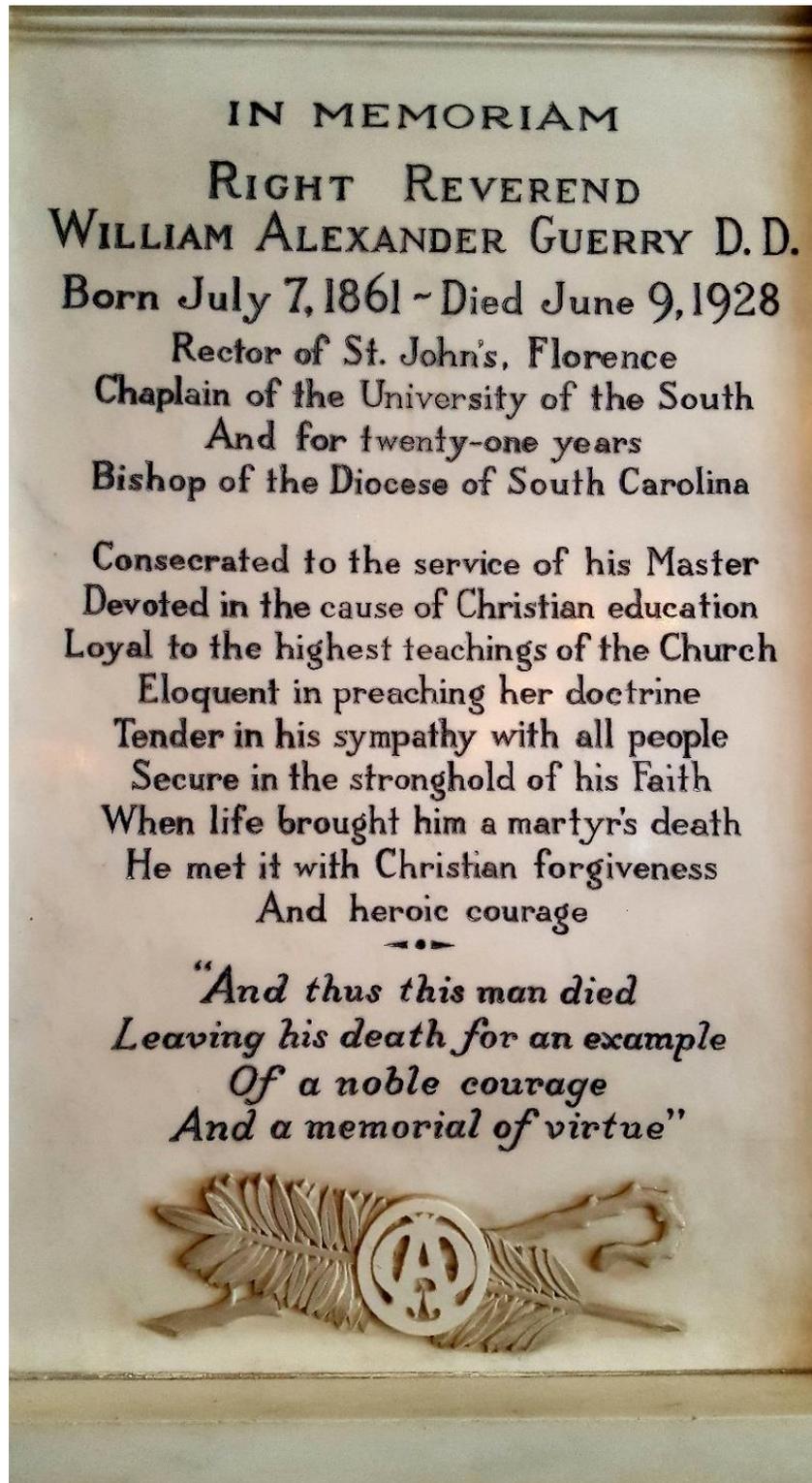
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The Rev. Furman L. Buchanan
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The Book of Genesis reveals to us that Sarah was a jealous person. This woman of power and privilege—whose very *name* means ‘princess’—simply could not stand the Egyptian slave woman or her son Ishmael. Even though Sarah received the miraculous blessing of a new child, her heart was as hard as stone. “Cast out this slave woman with her son,” Sarah demanded. Abraham was speechless. After all, Ishmael was his own flesh and blood.

Cast out this slave woman with her son!

Genesis 21:10

We need to recognize jealousy as one of the most toxic forms of fear. Jealous people become blind to the gifts and graces of their own lives. Jealousy afflicts the rich as well as the poor; the strong as well as the weak. Jealousy takes the worst in us—greed, pride, wrath, and other deadly sins—and brings them all to a rolling boil. Jealousy clouds our judgment; fuels our passions; and lights the spark on our rage.

Like Sarah, Herbert was a jealous person. This man who possessed the privilege and honor of the title ‘reverend’ simply could not stand the way blacks were being welcomed and included in the life of the Episcopal Church...blacks like Deaconess Anna Alexander, the first ordained African American woman in the south (and maybe in the entire country).

Last week, we heard about the remarkable faith of Anna, a child of slaves who became a distinguished leader in Christ's one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Deaconess Alexander loved and served *all* her neighbors—black *and* white. She led the most generous congregation in the Diocese of Georgia. Like her beloved Jesus, she showed an undeniable preference for the poor, the hungry, the sick, and those in need.

For example, Deaconess Alexander built a Church School at St. Cyrian's in Darien, Georgia to give even the poorest children a Christian education. She shined the light of Christ in Macintosh County, Georgia for *everyone to see*...except for those who refused to see—like the Rev. Herbert Woodward—the priest at St. Andrew's, (the white Episcopal Church in Darien), just a short walk up the hill from the riverbank. The Rev. Herbert Woodward later moved to the Episcopal Diocese of S.C. where he served under the Rt. Rev. William Guerry.

Looking back at the story from Genesis, we know that Sarah got her way. For the second time Hagar was ejected from the household. At Sarah's insistence, Abraham dismissed his Egyptian slave, Hagar, and his own first-born son out into the desert. For Hagar it seemed like a death sentence. She had every reason to fear—not just for *her* life, but even moreso for the vulnerable life of her innocent child. It is a bitter irony that the name Ishmael means ‘God will hear.’ How could God possibly hear if you are thrown to the jackals and vultures?

Unlike Sarah, the Rev. Herbert Woodward was *not* getting his way. Bishop William Guerry was calling for the election of a black Suffragan bishop for South Carolina to work alongside him for racial healing. In 1915 Herbert Woodward attacked his bishop's idea, writing a 45-page pamphlet of opposition.

“There is much to be feared of the ‘negro’” he complained. Herbert personalized his attack against the bishop, arguing that if Guerry had his way he would (quote) “root out of the land, out of the hearts of the people and out of the statute books...the Southern principle of white supremacy.” Even though Herbert had received splendid blessings—education at the University of the South and ordination as a priest—like Sarah, his heart was as hard as stone.

Even though Herbert Woodward was disagreeable, Bishop Guerry continued to reach out. Bishop Guerry believed the Church should strive for “unity, not uniformity.” Bishop Guerry believed (quote) “the Church must be broad enough to embrace within its communion every living soul.”

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The Church must be broad enough to embrace every living soul.

Bishop William Guerry

Dear people, when we live with faith—and by that I mean steadfast commitment to Christ's words and deeds—then our Church becomes more expansive, healthy, and alive. On the other hand, when we live with fear, the church becomes closed, diseased, and withered.

The Rev. Herbert Woodward lived with fear. He moved back to Georgia. He suffered misfortune. He, himself, became closed, diseased, and withered. As Deaconess Alexander's loving, caring, Christ-like witness spread; the Rev. Woodward's jealous hatred became more intractable. He was consumed with envy and wrath.

He grew so disturbed that he decided to take matters into his own hands. The Rev. Herbert Woodward boarded a train from Savannah to Charleston. On June 4th, 1928 he entered St. Philip's Episcopal Church in downtown; walked into his bishop's office; and shot him with a pistol.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus warns us that there will be divisions. Jesus warns that people we know and love will turn on us if we follow him instead of *them*. Jesus speaks these uncomfortable words: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Now, we know Jesus was completely and utterly nonviolent to the very end. We also know that his words and deeds cut like a sword between the blessed poor, hungry, sorrowful, and rejected who were oppressed; and the woefully rich, powerful, scornful, elite who were their oppressors.

Jesus challenges us to stand with the oppressed, and resist and pray for oppressors in whatever form that takes. Jesus warns that we will be rejected and we will suffer for choosing to follow him. He says bluntly, "whoever does

not take up the cross and follow me...is not worthy of me." I wish it was easier than that. I wish it was more pleasant and peaceful than that. But following the way of Jesus *is* difficult and dangerous, and expensive. He said so, himself.

There *is* good news in the tragic story about Hagar and Ishmael. When things were so bad that Hagar could not even bear to look at her son, God heard...Ishmael. Ishma-*el*...*God will hear*. And then the angel of the Lord spoke the familiar words to Hagar that angels always speak: "Do not be afraid."

We cry out to the Lord, just like Hagar and Ishmael, in the midst of *our* fears. And God hears our cry. As the psalmist proclaimed, "In the time of my trouble I will call upon you (O Lord), for you will answer me." We need not only to cry out, *but also to listen*. We need to listen for our angels who remind us, "Do not be afraid."

- ❖ Angels who help open our eyes and remind us, "Do not be afraid."
- ❖ Angels who lead us in pathways of justice and peace, and remind us, "Do not be afraid."
- ❖ Angels who challenge us to live with more mercy and compassion toward our neighbors, and remind us, "Do not be afraid."

You see, when we live with less fear and more faith, we can hear the voices of our angels more clearly. When we live with less fear and more faith, we can overcome the deadly sins of jealousy, greed, pride, and wrath. When we live with less fear and more faith, we can refuse to light the spark on our hate.

Listen now to the voice of someone who lived with less fear and more faith than we can easily imagine. It is the voice of Bishop William Guerry, speaking from his hospital bed with a gunshot wound he suffered from one of his priests. "How is Woodward?" he asked. Perhaps he knew that after Woodward had shot him, he turned the gun on himself.

For twenty years Bishop Guerry showed our diocese how to live with less fear and more faith. For twenty years Bishop Guerry had taken up the cross and followed Jesus, standing alongside the poor, hungry, sorrowful, and rejected who had been oppressed by slavery and were still being oppressed—legally and illegally.

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With two decades of episcopal ministry in our diocese hanging in the balance...*with his very life hanging in the balance*, Bishop William Guerry once again chose faith over fear as he followed in the way of Jesus and spoke and prayed in the way of Jesus.

In other words, Bishop Guerry ministered and prayed *not only* for the oppressed, *but also* for the oppressors, like Herbert Woodward. On what turned out to be his death bed, William Guerry found the strength and courage to forgive and love his enemy, just as Jesus had done with his last breaths. "I know God will forgive him," he said, "because he did not know what he was doing."

Jesus said, "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Today, June 25th, we join our sisters and brothers of the Episcopal Church in S.C. as they commemorate the life and witness of Bishop William Guerry, a martyr who lost his life for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We remember and give thanks for a bold leader in our Church and in our state who lived with more faith than fear as he showed our diocese how to strive for more justice, act with more mercy, and live with more humility, just like Jesus.

Blessed be Bishop Guerry, Deaconess Alexander, and all the saints of their generation who did not fear, but rather committed themselves to honor Christ by striving, acting, speaking, praying, and living according to his ways. May we have grace to glorify Christ in our own day.

Amen.

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The Rev. Furman L. Buchanan

June 25, 2017

¹ *The quotations and other historical reference material regarding Bishop Guerry were drawn from "Sewanee Priest Murders Sewanee Bishop" by Donald Armentrout in Sewanee Perspectives: On the History of the University of the South, eds. Gerald L. Smith and Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., 2008: The University of the South, Sewanee, TN.*

The historical information about Deaconess Alexander was drawn from an article by Jan Saltzgeber featured on the website of the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia.

The reference to the Rev. Herbert Woodward's service at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Darien, Georgia was discovered in the Journals of Diocesan Conventions for the Diocese of Georgia from the first decade of the 20th century.

Genesis 21:8-21 Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17 Romans 6:1b-11 Matthew 10:24-39

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The Sacrifice of Isaac

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio

Florence, Italy

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At the beginning of the story of Abraham—not today's story, the *first* story—God speaks to Abraham. God calls Abraham at 75 years old to leave his country, his neighbors, and his family and go. God calls Abraham to go to an unknown place. These are the first recorded words that God speaks to Abraham.

In today's story God speaks again to Abraham. Once more God calls Abraham—at about 110 years old—to leave his country, his neighbors, and his family and go to an unknown place. There's a catch. Abraham believes this voice is calling him to take his son whom he loves, and offer him as a burnt sacrifice. These are the last recorded words that God speaks to Abraham.

Listen once again to the voice of Abraham. He says, "Here I am." Remember this response, because thousands of years later it is still a faithful response to God. "Here I am...imperfect, uncertain, and afraid; but willing to choose faith over fear and do my best."

Here I am!

Genesis 22:1, 7, 11

These last two weeks I have shared two different stories of saints from our part of the Church and our part of the world. They were each born during the years of the American Civil War. They were both ordained in 1907. Anna Alexander was ordained a deaconess in the Diocese of Georgia. She was the first African American woman to be ordained in the South, and probably in the country. That same year William Guerry was ordained as the Bishop of South Carolina. He served our diocese for more than twenty years before he became a martyr in 1928.

God called each of them to be—borrowing from the words of our prayer book—"the chosen vessels of God's grace, and the lights of the world in their generation." They lived and served in a time of great division, fear, poverty, and injustice in our country. They chose faith over fear. They also showed others how to choose faith over fear.

The chosen vessels of God's grace, and the lights of the world...

*Proper preface for a saint,
The Book of Common Prayer*

Like Abraham, each of them trusted God with the opportunities, difficulties, and changes that were placed before them. Like Abraham, they responded to God faithfully by saying, "Here I am...imperfect, uncertain, and afraid; but willing to choose faith over fear and do my best."

Abraham and Isaac walked for three days in the wilderness. The Bible story does not contain any dialogue on that lonesome journey. We cannot know everything that Abraham and Isaac were thinking or feeling, but we can imagine the fear—the well-deserved fear they both experienced.

As Abraham laid the weight of the wood for the fire onto his son's shoulders, Isaac calls out, "Father!" Once again, Abraham answers faithfully, "Here I am." Remember this response, because thousands of years later, it is still a faithful response when we see the burdens our children carry. "Here I am...imperfect, uncertain, and afraid; but willing to choose faith over fear and do my best."

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In this final sermon of a series exploring faith and fear through the stories of Abraham, I want to draw your attention to two more chosen vessels of God's grace who have been lights in the world in their generation. There are many saints from which I could choose, but here a couple of stories that further punctuate the way in which people of faith stand up in the midst of division and fear, poverty and injustice, and say, "Here I am."

George was six years old when Deaconess Alexander was spreading the Gospel in South Georgia and when Bishop Guerry became a martyr in Charleston. George did not know them, but they shared something in common. They were all Episcopalians. George had special gifts—particularly for music and science. He had the special privilege of attending a distinguished Episcopal College in Ohio—Kenyon College.

As a student at Kenyon, George noticed something wrong. He noticed that all of the fraternities on campus were segregated and exclusive, and he knew that was a real problem for a Christian School. So he and his friends started a new fraternity—The Archon Society. It was chartered as an organization that would not discriminate on the basis of race, creed, culture, or any other distinction other than character and commitment to service and outreach. Their motto—*Esse Quam Videri*—means "to be, rather than to seem to be." And it is still going strong!

Like Abraham, George answered a call. Like Abraham, George saw youth carrying an unfair burden. In his case, he saw young people carrying the weight of being the 'wrong' race or culture or creed to gain social acceptance on a Christian campus, and he said, "Here I am... imperfect, uncertain, and afraid; but willing to choose faith over fear and do my best." Some of you know George by his nickname, Gus. At the 8:30 service we thanked him, and

we recognized that *we also* will have opportunities in our own day to listen for God's call, and to choose faith over fear by making difficult and unpopular choices like he did. *We also* have the chance to respond, "Here I am."

According to the story from Genesis, at the last possible moment an angel calls from heaven: "Abraham, Abraham!" For the third time, Abraham answers faithfully, "Here I am."

Remember this response, because thousands of years later it is still a faithful response when we hear the call to safeguard our children. "Here I am... imperfect, uncertain, and afraid; but willing to choose faith over fear and do my best."



Nancy was just learning how to walk when Bishop Guerry became a martyr. She was born in North Carolina where there was already a black suffragan bishop in the Episcopal Church. She, herself, was Presbyterian until she was welcomed into the Episcopal Church while attending college. Nancy had special gifts—including wisdom and courage.

Nancy used these gifts as a guidance counselor at the junior high school in Woodruff. She noticed something wrong—there were never any black children in the guidance office. She was told by another staff member that he just didn't have time to see *everybody*.

Nancy made time. She went beyond the call of duty to teach Michelle—a 15-year-old stuck in 7th grade—how to read so she wouldn't give up. Another child looked up Nancy's last name in the phone book and would call her guidance counselor's house at night because she was afraid. Nancy answered those calls and calmed the girl's fears.

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Some of the teachers and other folks around town gave Nancy a special title for her work with the children who had been neglected. The title was not intended as a complement.

Like Abraham, Nancy answered a call. Like Abraham, Nancy saw a need to safeguard *all* children, especially those who were being left out and left behind, and she said, "Here I am...imperfect, uncertain, and afraid; but willing to choose faith over fear and do my best."

*Here I am...imperfect,
uncertain, and afraid; but
willing to choose faith
over fear and do my best.*

Nancy, it is important for us to see you, to thank you, and to recognize that *we also* will have opportunities in our own day to listen for God's call, and to choose faith over fear by making difficult and unpopular choices like you have. *We also* have the chance to respond, "Here I am."

Dear people of God, You and I have a great privilege. We have the privilege of standing up with none other than Jesus Christ, and responding, "Here I am" by choosing faith instead of fear. Here *I am*...trusting God with opportunities, difficulties, and changes in my life and in the world.

The Good News of today's Gospel is that Jesus promises more than just standing beside us. He

promises not only to be *with us*, but to be *within* us so that whomever welcomes us, welcomes him. And whomever welcomes him, welcomes our Father in heaven.

In this generation, whether you are a child, a teenager, a young adult, a parent, a person of middle age, or (like Abraham) up to 110 years old...in *this* generation, like every other, God calls us to respond.

Can you believe that you and I are chosen vessels of God's grace, and the lights of the world in this generation? It is hard to believe. It is even harder to trust, particularly when choosing faith over fear is difficult and unpopular.

We're not alone. Many saints have gone before us, going all the way back, thousands of years to the frightening journeys and unknown places to which God called Abraham.

Like Abraham, Anna Alexander, William Guerry, Gus, and Nancy, some of our journeys will also be frightening and uncertain, but every journey begins with the first step. And the first step is listening to our call...and then responding, "Here I am."

Amen.

*St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Greenville, S.C.
The Rev. Furman L. Buchanan
July 2, 2017*

Genesis 22:1-14 Psalm 13 Romans 6:12-23 Matthew 10:40-42
