

## Good News

It seemed a day like any other, but it wasn't. Abram's relationship with God, going well, was about to get a big boost. God turned up with a Covenant. Abram got a new name, Abraham, 'a father of nations,' and quite the list of promises. Along with receiving the land of Canaan where he lived and a pledge that his offspring would become kings of nations, he received assurance; God would always be *his* God. All of this, in perpetuity, for Abraham and his descendants. He just won the ancient world lottery.

There is no doubt he had bought tickets. All along, he had done his best to follow God's wishes. Developing a strong faith and trust, he received quite the payoff for his efforts. We all hope for the big win. We know, if we don't enter, there is no chance and if we do enter, there is only a slim chance. Still, at some point, someone has to win and it could just be us. As the numbers are drawn, we hope for good news.

It seemed a day like any other, but it wasn't. Abraham heard the voice of God and it wasn't good news. He was to travel three days to a mountain where he would sacrifice his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. Poor Isaac even had to carry the wood, which would fuel the fire. As Abraham reached for the knife to kill his son, a voice from heaven, realizing Abraham would not refuse a command from God, stopped him. Abraham had passed the ultimate test of faith. If he spoke, Isaac's words are not recorded, but I imagine he had serious concerns.

Many years ago, I felt God calling. Like Abraham, I understood I was to leave my land and family. Unlike Abraham, I didn't receive a list of promises, but none were expected. My relationship with God had been more 'off' than 'on' and I hadn't always bought tickets. It didn't feel like winning and since God kept returning to me, even when I got off-track, I concluded he wouldn't give up until I did something about it. Thankfully, I didn't have children I would be

asked to sacrifice and leaving my homeland, I associated more with Isaac carrying the wood that might burn me, rather than the great man of faith, Abraham.

My calling hadn't been clear. It wasn't God's fault. Just as he got through, I would find a reason to doubt, to delay, to disassociate with anything related to the heavenly realm. When I did finally surrender, the calling resembled more 'Mission Impossible' than being a missionary—'your mission, Francis, should you choose to accept it...As always, should you be caught or killed, you may be reminded to have more faith and trust in the future. This message will self-destruct in five seconds. Good luck—God.'

I contemplated what my new life would be like. What I would be asked to do. How I would do it and top of the list—why did God think it was a good idea to ask me? Several months into my new adventure, the answers rolled in. It may surprise you to know that just like other stereotypes and labels that fill our world; there is also one for people doing 'God's work.' These are the people who know God better, whose prayers carry more weight, who have a hotline to heaven in all matters...and I was one of them.

My first reaction was one of laughter (on the inside), but more and more I dreaded hearing these types of comments. That 'I was special,' because of the work I did or that it was so wonderful 'I had given up my life to follow God.' Some viewed me as a hero and when deflecting comments didn't work, I got more direct with my answers. 'Actually, earning minimum wage and raising a family or being a single parent mother to three children, is way more heroic,' I would say. None worked. The praise I heard of whom others thought I was; didn't fit and I could only conclude that God had even a bigger sense of humor than I originally thought.

So, what exactly was I supposed to be doing? That was a question I was sure I could answer—to spread the Gospel. From the Old English, '*god-spell*,' meaning 'good news' or glad tidings,' Gospel, is the telling of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. If you are a Christian,

you will be familiar with the words of Jesus. Even those who are not may be familiar with his teachings. Like all of the world's great spiritual teachers, he had a way of simply communicating a message of love, peace, and forgiveness. It's amazing that millions of theological words have been written about a man who, when you remove the story repetitions in the four gospels and his quotes from previous biblical stories, is recorded to have said very little. Still, loving everyone, including our enemies, is a lifetime challenge in itself and one I could practice every day.

I was ready and off I set to deliver the 'good news.' At that time, I worked at a drop-in center for the poor and homeless. Up to 200 people would arrive daily for rest, hot food, clothes, and food from a food shelf to take home. My group organized and ran everything with the help of volunteers on the weekends. Before serving the hot meal, someone would say a prayer. The day arrived when it was my turn. I had little time to prepare. You might find that an odd comment. I didn't have trouble praying, but I felt a desire to say something beyond the 'Grace' prayer (Bless us, O Lord, and these they gifts etc.) which was often used.

As the food arrived on the serving tables and the line formed, I moved to the front. Still uncertain what to say, thoughts drifted through my mind. I could talk about the power of forgiveness and how Jesus suffered for us, but looking at the tired bodies and broken spirits, all I saw was suffering. I could talk about God's love for everyone, until I remembered Ghandi's words, 'To a man with an empty stomach, food is God.' Stuck on what to say, I did what I thought anyone else would do in my situation—I talked about baseball.

The night before, I went to see the local professional team play. They had a good team, winning the World Series a few years before I arrived. Everyone knew the most well known player on the team. Much liked, he achieved a lot in his career, but that night something special happened. He hit his first ever, grand slam. For those not familiar with baseball, a grand slam is when the batter hits a home run while runners on his team occupy all the bases. It's the highest

single scoring event in the game and it doesn't occur often. Everyone assumed because he had achieved so much, he had done it before. I don't remember my words, but somewhere in the telling of my baseball story, a prayer emerged.

I don't know what anyone thought of my prayer. Perhaps, some didn't understand my English accent or thought that the really 'good news' occurred when I stopped and they could eat. Either way, I continued to ponder how to deliver a message of *glad tidings*.

People had what I call 'hard' needs. These included all the material things we need in life: food, clothes, somewhere to live, assistance in paying a bill, bus tickets, change for the laundry machine etc. and although they are the easiest to address, millions in our world struggle with basic needs. Many were generous in giving from their abundance to those with less or little and people always appreciated the help, but something was missing...and of course, I was totally wrong in what I thought it was.

Time passed and I had a new assignment. Moving to the most violent and poorest part of the city would present a new set of challenges. I have found there are many misconceptions about people who we call 'poor.' These include laziness, unwillingness to work, having no drive or dreams and many more. I never had those thoughts and rarely met any who exhibited those traits. No, I thought they were missing something far worse...a sense of a loving God in their lives. I had 'good news'—I could help. It was time to live up to the hero figure people thought I was. Looking back, I can't imagine the amount of laughter coming from the heavens, because so many of these 'poor' people spoke of their love for the God of their understanding and God's love for them.

Struggling to see what I could offer in the way of 'good news,' life, as it often does, delivered bad news in the form of loss. The seventeen year old son of my next door neighbor was shot and killed in a gang related incident. Several months later, my other next door neighbor, a husband of five children, in the wrong place at the wrong time was also killed. We

find much in our world to cause separation and distance between us, but loss is something we all experience and feel deeply. None of us leave this world without shedding many tears and it's within those tears of loss that perhaps our greatest experience for shared human healing exists. Strangely, I never feared for my own life. Perhaps, I subconsciously thought that if something happened to me, God would send a better-equipped replacement who didn't keep thinking he had answers and was better at listening.

Our losses in life give us opportunities to see things in new perspectives and so I began to reflect on what I was supposed to learn. I wasn't Abraham, but I did feel that God and I had some kind of Covenant. In our world of noise, listening intently is a miracle in itself and I knew if something would be revealed to me, it would come from the teachers put in my path—the people called 'poor' who lived around me.

I am sure God isn't surprised, but I am amazed what I miss, because so many of our answers are not locked behind doors to libraries of Theology or complex spiritual concepts we need to ponder for years. They are quite straightforward and I received mine in the form of a kiss on the forehead from my God. No, not like the gentle kiss a child receives from its mother, but this kind of **KISS—Keep It Simple Stupid**.

We humans have mastered complexity, taking us further away from the power of imagination and simple practices that bring clarity and peace. We are leaders in the art of complication. Rather than learning to communicate more clearly, we created more means to communicate. Ever faster, seldom better, the need for speed is causing us to move beyond the obvious to the search for the sublime. All the great spiritual teachers, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, and many more, didn't spend their time on the details. They provided a sketch for us to follow and we added the color—lots and lots of color.

Have we lost our way? Sometimes it feels that way, but the message of the Gospel and all scriptures is just as real and needed as it has always been, but just like with any recipe there are

times when tweaking the ingredients provides a fresh outlook and added flavor. Love, peace, and forgiveness, will always be the beating heart, but we often need to bathe in the waters of renewal, to refresh ourselves to continue the journey with hope and in faith. There were many contenders to add momentum to my 'good news.' Compassion and non-judgment were certainly high on the list and I was quite taken with the Dalai Lama's words about kindness, but what I discovered in all the stories I heard, on all the faces I saw; present in every child and adult, was a different kind of loss. The world is making us less sure of ourselves. Bit by bit we are losing hope that a different future could be possible and the magic that once energized us is slowly draining away.

There, buried beneath daily problems, the lost thoughts and dreams lie sleeping. The walls we built to keep us from hurt and harm also acted as a barrier to push us forward. The noise we live with every day, as we talk, tweet, and text fill our circuits to overflowing. The news we receive across the media web full of bad news and troubles we feel we cannot positively impact. Worn down, we only see the pain of the world, the sorrow of what separates us from each other, and our own anxiety and anguish. We forget that our God would always be our God and to keep our spirit lamp burning, we need to connect with the source of our being in the quiet, away from the noises that don't provide answers.

If there is a burnt offering sacrifice we are asked to make, it is to lay down the burdens of the past we carry and place on them our worries, fears, and disappointments. To connect with an old or new ingredient to make our 'good news' recipe fresh again, because unlike what the noises tell us, there is much we can do for each other that doesn't require the judging the voices shout we should be engaging in. It was there in the quiet...in the burnt ashes of my letting go, I discovered what was missing on the faces and from the voices of so many...the poverty of detachment—from dreams of happiness—from a belief that their lives were important—from the spirit within which provides hope. Dampened and disillusioned, people turned inward; blaming

themselves that they were somehow at fault; their problems were somehow unique; their worries and fears, unusual or not perceived as normal.

‘Encouragement’ was what I added to my ‘good news’ list, because in this difficult journey we take, sometimes all we need to do is to remind each other of what we have forgotten.

