

More than Almost**By John Blossom****25 June 2017**

“Call me Ishmael.”

These are the beginning words of "Moby Dick," Herman Melville's famous novel, a story of how Ishmael, a wandering soul in New York City, decides to join the crew of a whaling ship, that sails from Nantucket. Ishmael encounters preachers, pagans, and other people who seem to have lost their sense of God altogether - until a huge white whale destroys everyone on the ship but Ishmael.

God did not forget Ishmael.

“Call me Ishmael.”

A baby was born to Abraham and Sarah, through Hagar, Sarah's servant. His name was Ishmael. Sarah, childless and old, wanted to make sure that she and Abraham would have an heir. When God promised Abraham a covenant of love and guidance for all of his descendants, it was Ishmael who was circumcised along with Abraham, as a sign of God's covenant promise. Yet when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, Sarah's heart turned against Ishmael. She demanded that Ishmael and Hagar be sent into the wilderness, with only a day's worth of food and water.

But God did not forget Ishmael.

“Call me Ishmael.”

The English priest John Wesley set sail for America in 1735, sure that his devotion to a pious Christian life would lead him to success, only to find that he was a less than perfect child of God. Like the whale Moby Dick smashing the sailor Ishmael's ship, Wesley's ship of sure faith was shattered. Like Hagar's son, Ishmael, Wesley felt like a castaway from his church, unsure of how his soul would live another day.

Yet God would not forget this Ishmael, as God led Wesley to a prayer meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, in 1738, where his heart was strangely warmed, a warmth that changed the world.

Call ME Ishmael.

Twenty years ago, I was in London, at an office building on Tabernacle Street, just off of City Road. Twenty years before that, I had decided to leave a Methodist seminary. I did not join a whaling ship, but I wandered along many of the same streets that Herman Melville walked in New York City, and sought the whale of success in business, here and abroad. My soul was shipwrecked, kept alive by the tattered remains of a private faith, an

almost-Christian, as John Wesley put it, alienated from the ship of religion, and searching for the wind of faith in my sails.

Yet God had not forgotten this Ishamel.

My appointment at the office on Tabernacle Street was delayed. I was bored by the office lobby, so I stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. I noticed that the office building surrounded an old church, and in the paved courtyard behind the church, there was a tomb, standing alone. I walked up to the tomb, wondering who might be buried there. I found a plaque on the side of the tomb, which read, "To the memory of the venerable John Wesley."

God had led one Ishmael to another Ishmael.

Later on, a friend of mine invited me into the church next to that courtyard, John Wesley's chapel. As he opened the doors to the chapel, the light of what I can only describe to you as God's Holy Spirit, came streaming through that doorway. Above the altar of the chapel were three words, carved in wood, lettered in gold: "Holy, Holy, Holy." I was amazed by the holiness of the place, so much so that I did not dare enter the chapel itself.

As I rode in a London cab back to my hotel, I talked with the cabbie about my experience. In his thick Cockney accent, the cabbie said, "You should go back to school, then, shouldn't you?"

I muttered softly to him, "Yes, I should. I should."

Call me Ishmael. Call me a person who thought that God's promises had gone to others, and not to me. Call me just one of countless people who needed a church, but found himself outside the church that he had called home as a child. Call me, along with millions of people around the world, a refugee, who needed a home for his faith. By God's grace, I found a place in my home again. By God's grace, God's covenant, carried through Isaac's children, gave us Jesus, the Christ, and God's Holy Spirit, to give the Ishmaels of the world God's true inheritance of faith.

God's church is a church of Ishmaels, a church that God created to bring God's promises to the ashamed, the forgotten, the broken, the sick, the starving, the thirsting.

This is my last sermon before I become a Pastor at South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church. I have been called by our church to be sent into a new role of servant leadership, as I complete my studies towards ordained ministries. Ishmael has been given a ship to sail, a ship blown on the winds of God's grace, and God's grace alone.

That grace blew me to you two years ago. I was one year into my seminary studies, and wondering what would happen next in my search for God's path. Then Barbara Marks called me, and said that she had been asked to be the Pastor of First United Methodist Church Middletown, and that she had agreed to take the position if I would come with her. I was amazed, and overjoyed.

Before I had met any of you, or even met with Pastor Barbara, I was walking the streets of Middletown, excited to see everything that this city offers as a mission field for ministries. And then came the day when I met you, and saw what a church in an Elks Club actually did to be God's church. You are an amazing family of Christians, and it has been my joy and my privilege to serve you all, and all the people of Middletown.

I cannot thank you and Pastor Barbara enough for all of the opportunities to grow in ministry and in service that you have provided me. You have allowed me to express my passion for growing the church, sometimes with encouragement, sometimes, perhaps, with just tolerance, and I have learned so very much because of your encouragement, your tolerance, and your gentle feedback.

You have allowed me to develop as a leader of mission, outreach, worship, and small group ministries, learning from my mistakes, as well as from my modest success. You have nurtured the Christ in me, so that I may nurture the Christ in you, and in a world of Ishmaels who need you. I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and I wish you all the very best in your ministries, as we grow together in Christ.

My final thought is a simple one: be more than an almost-Christian. The downfall of the modern church, I believe, is that too often we are more like Sarah and Abraham than we would like to admit. Too often we offer the Ishmaels of the world a skin of water, a piece of bread and a farewell, when what they really want and need is for us to embrace them as our own, as they are, and not as threats to the survival of the church, or less than worthy of the church because of their social status.

At our recent outreach event for families affected by drug overdoses, Debbie stood up, and shared with a room full of people the story of her own family's losses from the tragedy of drug abuse. In that moment, I believe, this church became Ishmael's church. When we embraced Michelle and her struggles to find wholeness in her life, as our own struggles, this church became Ishmael's church.

When we express our Christian faith as our willingness to embrace the world's vulnerability as our own vulnerability, with a heart that is fully open to God's mercy and power, to find the healing that we and the world can only find together in Christ, this church becomes Ishmael's church.

When we realize that Methodism was founded by an Ishmael, who was called to rescue the perishing Ishmaels of the world as the true legacy of Christianity, then hopefully we begin to realize that the whole purpose, the whole meaning, of being a United Methodist, is not to be almost-Christian Sarahs and Abrahams, content to take but not give God's blessings, but to be John Wesley's complete Christians, made complete only by the circumcision of our hearts, through faith in God's grace, and God's grace alone, as the entire and absolute source of our worth and merit in life.

So, go. Be more than you are, in Christ, through God's grace. It is who you are meant to be. You can do it. And by God's grace, and God's grace alone, you will do it.

Happy sailing. Amen.