

Entertaining Angels (Abraham and Sarah)

Genesis 18:1-14



Planting

Read Matthew 13:31-32

What kind of faith does it take to believe in God? To believe the promises of God? To remain confident that in our faith journey someone really cares about our deepest longings? Who celebrates our “aha” moments? Questions such as these come in some form to many people. Who hasn’t pondered, “Is there a God?” “Why would God speak to me?” “Why is God taking so long in answering my prayers?” “When I really need to hear from God, can God send messengers to my doorstep?” Answers unfold over the course of a lifetime -- sometimes building hope, at other times bringing disappointments, or on occasion strengthening our resolve to trust an unseen God.

The witness of Scripture is that God is not indifferent to his creation or to those who dwell upon the face of the earth. We see in the Bible a God determined to bring people into unique and unending fellowship based upon grace and mercy. The self-disclosing, self-revealing God wants people to recognize him, to depend upon him, and to love him. We also find in the writings of the Bible the stories of remarkable yet ordinary people whose life journeys intersect with that self-revealing God. They go from a place of knowing little or nothing about God to assurance that what God has promised can and will come to fruition. They are in essence people with mustard seed faith, that which starts small, but over the course of time grows and testifies that nothing is too hard for the Lord.

In the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, there are ample stories of faith, but one that stands out for me is the story of Abraham and Sarah, as recorded in Genesis 11-25. We first meet them in a place of civilization, responding to the Lord’s call to leave the familiar and venture into a wilderness in route to Canaan. With that call there is a promise of blessing for Abraham (Abram) and Sarah (Sarai), and for the entirety of humanity. They have only to follow the leading of God. Their journey to Canaan may be relatively brief, but their faith journey takes decades, even as our own often does. They mature in faith through times of testing, temptation, blessing, and through the presence of a God who is nearer than they could ever believe.

As we read through Genesis 18:1-14 be alert to what Abraham’s and Sarah’s faith offer us today:

- 1) An awareness that God longs for a personal, ongoing relationship with each person;
- 2) That we can recognize the Lord’s voice and presence; and
- 3) That hospitality extended offers an opportunity for blessing.

If you have been a student of the Bible for any length of time, you no doubt know the story of Abraham and Sarah. But lets recap a few details before getting into today’s reading. In Genesis 11:26-32 we have the genealogy of Abraham; Genesis 12:1-3, the call of Abraham; Genesis 13 and 14 Abraham’s relationship with his nephew Lot and other individuals; Genesis 15:1-21, God’s covenant with Abraham; Genesis 16:1-15, Abraham’s and Sarah’s attempt to fulfill God’s promise of a son through a surrogate; Genesis 17:1-14, circumcision, the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham; and Genesis 17:15-22, God’s renewed promise to Abraham that Sarah would bear a child. When we read this later portion of Scripture (Genesis 17:15-22) we find that God tells Abraham that despite their advanced age, Abraham and Sarah will become parents in the

next year.

God has been meeting with Abraham from the time of the call to leave Ur of the Chaldeans. God had been speaking words of faith into Abraham's life. Consider Genesis 13:14-16, in which God tells Abraham that in addition to a permanent place, God will give Abraham "*offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.*" When Abraham has a crisis of faith, God speaks with him assuring Abraham that a natural born son will be his heir and the descendants of Abraham will be as the stars, which cannot be counted (Genesis 15:1-5). Abraham takes these words to heart and the writer of Genesis notes, "*And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness,*" (Genesis 15:6).

Though Abraham would not fully understand how God was going to fulfill the promise, Abraham still had faith in God.

Question: In what ways has God given you assurance that He is with you?

Tending

Read Genesis 18:1-14

God has been speaking to Abraham over the course of 25 years. He now comes to speak with both Abraham and Sarah regarding the long awaited promise. It happens in a way that seems quite common place. It is in the arena of hospitality. What begins as an exercise of common courtesy reveals the depth of God's love and sense of humor in dealing with sinful people. Abraham and Sarah knew a great deal about hospitality. They had traveled far from home and relied upon the kindness of people in strange lands. Civilized people would offer water, food, and shelter to travelers, well aware that they too might be in need of similar assistance. People could not count on inns as reliable places for provision or safety. There was always a risk, but an understanding that hospitality toward a stranger was more than good manners, it was the means of people acquiring news, experiencing fellowship, entering into trade or family alliances, or demonstrating the goodness of God to those in need. It is not surprising the Abraham would be looking out for possible travelers. It could be that he was waiting for news from home in Haran, an update from Lot or a chance to speak with a stranger about the Lord. In any case, he was poised to be a blessing to those passing by.

As we read the story of the three visitors, they must have been a curious sight to Abraham. They were traveling in the heat of the day. There is no mention of baggage or a caravan. They seem unconcerned with safety. No doubt their arrival near the oaks of Mamre brought Abraham to his feet in an instant. There are questions he must have about these men and so he runs to meet them and tend to their needs.

As Abraham waits on these visitors one may wonder, "When does it become obvious to Abraham that his guests are not mere men?" He certainly knew that of the three men, one was obviously in charge and the other two were his escorts/subordinates. But did he know the Lord was present when he bowed to the ground? We can't be certain. But Abraham had an expectation that this guest would bring blessing into his life. We note that Abraham calls himself a servant on two occasions in this passage (verses 3 and 5). Abraham is a humble man hoping to enrich another's life, trusting that his modest efforts will also bring blessing to home.

Questions: In what way does Abraham honor his guests? Why would he personally take charge of their care? Why does he enlist the help of his wife rather than delegating all of this work to a servant? The three men graciously accept Abraham's hospitality. They are willing to wait for the host to meet their needs. When all is prepared Abraham stands as a servant to further minister to them.

Question: In what ways do we honor the unexpected stranger who appears at our doorstep? While Abraham stands at the ready, the Lord opens the conversation with a question about Sarah.

He inquires as to where Sarah is? She is, of course all ears, no doubt having heard her name spoken by the stranger. Though she may or may not have intended to eavesdrop, Sarah was listening in on their conversation.

When she overhears the Lord's conversation with Abraham she is incredulous. For 25 years she has heard her husband talk about the promise of God regarding their family. The promise had first been given to Abraham. It had been clarified that a servant would not be the heir of the promise; neither the son of Hagar, but that Sarah herself would bear Abraham a son in her old age. This time she gets to hear the word, first hand. There is no filter and no one to get it wrong. She hears it herself and her response is a laugh of disbelief. When the Lord enters into direct conversation with Sarah she is thrown off balance. No human being could know what she was laughing about, but God could. He confronts her on her laughter. Sarah responds with denial. She is quick to lie, because she is frightened at the prospect that her life is not as predictable as she assumed. She claims not to have laughed in disbelief. But in verse 15 we see that the Lord won't let her pretend that nothing happened. With words of grace and blessing, God is also able to bring words of correction, as he did with Sarah. She will remember her musings and God's pointed question, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

Question: In what ways have you found these words to be true in your life, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

Question: When did Sarah truly believe the Lord had spoken to her? When do you believe the Lord speaks with you?

Harvesting

In this passage of Scripture Abraham and Sarah are visited by three men. From the text we learn that one is the Lord. Reading in the first verse of Chapter 19 we get a sense that the other traveling companions were in fact angels. The Lord came with the angels as a messenger. He came with the purpose of giving Abraham and Sarah some good news personally! The angels would continue on to another rendezvous with Lot at Sodom. But it was the Lord's purpose to remove any doubt from the hearts of his servants, Abraham and Sarah. God wanted to raise their level of expectation beyond their own abilities. They had lived long lives and were perhaps thinking that they could not in their own strength bring forth God's promise. And truly, that is what God wanted them to see. They had to depend wholly upon him for the answer to their prayers. Their bodies were as good as dead. But God brought forth a child in their old age. Perhaps one of the sweetness passages of Scripture is found in Genesis 21:1, "*The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised.*"

Question: In what ways is God trying to raise your level of expectation?

In Hebrews 13:1-2, we find these words, “*Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.*” Certainly Abraham and Sarah were at first unaware of the identities of their guests, but they caught on and received a blessing. They gave of their time and resources and were available to God. Should we live our lives expecting angels to visit? The writer of Hebrews says that the priority is in being gracious, giving and then letting the blessing unfold as the Lord has determined.

Question: In what ways can you begin to be more hospitable to strangers, either in your community or church setting?

Celebrating the Bounty

Print this litany for each person to have and ask for a volunteer to read the Voice of One or you read that portion.

Litany for a Gracious Host

Based on the Prayer Attributed to Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

The Voice of One: Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

The Voice of Many: Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

The Voice of One: Where there is injury, pardon;

The Voice of Many: Where there is doubt, faith;

The Voice of One: Where there is despair, hope;

The Voice of Many: Where there is darkness, light;

The Voice of One: Where there is sadness, joy.

The Voice of Many: O Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console.

The Voice of One: To be understood as to understand,

The Voice of Many: To be loved as to love.

All: For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

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