

Hospitality to Angels Unawares

Gen 18

Call: Ps 36:5-6a

Scripture: Heb 13:1-2 (MSG)

I. Intro

Good Morning. Today, we come to our 8th week in our studies in the life of Abraham, the person who the New Testament holds up as having the kind of faith that pleases the living God. But, even more, through studying the lives of Abraham and Sarah, we have learned a great deal about the character of God. For example, this God continues to initiate contact with Abraham and Sarah. They've done nothing to deserve all this attention. Yet, out of God's great love and grace, he continues to give himself to them.

Review

In fact, last week, in chapter 17, God promised to be their God, meaning he will give all that he is to them. This promise was part of the Abrahamic Covenant. Within this covenant, God also promised offspring from Sarah's old body, to which Abraham responded with incredulous laughter. Sarah was 90 years old at that time, Abraham was 100. And, we would expect the next chapter to be the birth narrative of Isaac. But, no. We get two long chapters that focus mainly on Abraham's nephew, Lot. If you remember, Lot had moved into the wicked city of Sodom in chapter 14.

Yet, in this week's text, we will see God initiating contact again with Abraham and Sarah, this time disguised as strangers, even angels. How will they respond this time? Their responses become quite instructive for us 4000 years later. And, through it all, we continue to learn about God's character.

I invite you into our text today, Genesis 18, verse 1.

II. The Hospitality of Abraham (1-8)

1 And the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. 2 He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth 3 and said, "O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. 4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, 5 while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." 6 And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah and said, "Quick! Three seahs of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." 7 And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man, who prepared it quickly. 8 Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree while they ate. (ESV)

A. Scene Setting

Our text begins during the hottest time of the day. It's siesta time when no one works. And, as Abraham is about fall asleep inside his tent, there comes a knock at the door. Three men have arrived at the wrong time, interrupting Abraham.

B. Abraham's Hospitality

The narrator surprises us by saying that these three visitors are the Lord, and his use of "behold" implies that these men simply appeared. God in his love and grace initiates again, but this time, incognito. And, it is not clear when Abraham realized that God had come to dinner. His use of "Lord" in verse 3 could simply mean "master."

Abraham doesn't see them approach, but, in normal Middle Eastern hospitality, implores them to stay. He then offers some water to wash their feet, common courtesy at that time, and a morsel of bread. What actually happens is an extravagant feast! This is a Thanksgiving feast!

The narrator gives unusual detail for this feast. Abraham goes into hyper-drive after his siesta is interrupted! He fetches things and runs quickly in a flurry of hospitable activity. He instructs Sarah to do things quickly. Meanwhile, he runs to the herd, kills a calf and gives it to the servants to prepare quickly. He then runs to the store to get milk and curds as side dishes. Note that meat would have been especially generous at this time, and the amount of flour is 36 pounds! This *is* an extravagant feast! Although hospitality to strangers was expected, Abraham goes far, far beyond in caring for these men. He then watches over them as they eat in the shade of the trees, ready to take care of any further requests.

God shows up as strangers, and how does Abraham respond? With extravagant hospitality, caring exceptionally for strangers. Indeed the Rabbis hold up Abraham as the supreme example of hospitality. Hebrews does as well as we read in our scripture reading (Heb 13:2). But Jesus, himself, attaches supreme significance to hospitality, especially in the sobering parable of the sheep and goats in Matt 25 (Matt 25:31-46). In that parable, he speaks of himself as the Son of Man, who when he returns will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep he invites to be with him forever. The goats on the other hand, are removed from his presence. And, what's the deciding factor? Jesus says this, "35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." The deciding factor is hospitality. Whoa. To be clear, trust in Jesus determines one's destiny, but a primary demonstration of trust in Jesus is hospitality, and especially to strangers.

And, notice, hospitality is not the same as entertainment. Entertainment is mindless consumption. Abraham is not entertaining his guests. Abraham is actively caring for his guests. Hospitality is enlarging and extending our hands and our tables to include another person, in Abraham's case, three people. But, even more, hospitality is enlarging and extending our hearts to include another person. It is an act of love. Because God first loved us, we love others (1 John 4:19). That's the hospitality Jesus speaks of.

Here at PBCC, we have a Sunday hospitality team. It is made up of the Community Café team, Greeters and Ushers, Outdoor Greeters (Connections Team), Welcome Center team, Sunday Prayer team and Communion Servers. If you are on any of these teams, please stand up. They are who make Sundays go here. Please stay standing. If you are able, can everyone please stand? Because here's the deal, you are all on his hospitality team, extending your hearts and your hands to include one another, and especially to include strangers. May our love be so porous, it oozes out to people that don't look like us. And, why? Because he first loved us and gave himself for us. Ok. You can sit down.

C. God Comes to Dinner?

Now, the narrator has said these strangers are the Lord, but the language he uses throughout this narrative is not clear, possibly to protect the mystery? But, as we continue, we will find out that at least one of the figures is the living God. So, until the incarnation, this is the only time God sits down at a meal with a person.

D. Rublev's Icon

The picture on the cover of the worship guide this week is perhaps the greatest masterpiece of Russian Orthodoxy.



It is an icon by Andrei Rublev from the 15th century. The icon is called *The Hospitality of Abraham*. It depicts three beautiful angelic figures sitting around the table under the Mamre trees. In the background, is Abraham's house symbolizing his tent, along with the hill that Abraham and God will walk along soon. We will come back to this icon at the end.

Let's move to our next scene, the Annunciation, verse 9.

III. The Annunciation to Sarah (9-15)

9 They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." 10 The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" 13 The LORD

said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' 14 Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." 15 But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh." (ESV)

A. The Promise

What an interesting ending to this scene? The meal finishes in silence as Abraham waits. The silence is broken with a question about Sarah. Sarah is in the tent during the meal as was custom at the time. It turns out that this meal was not for Abraham. This meal was for Sarah. God, in his love and grace, comes to dinner for the sake of Sarah. And, the Lord addresses her through Abraham. If Abraham didn't know by then, he knows now, these strangers are not mere men. These strangers have read the internet about Sarah! They know all about her. As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that God is talking. And, he makes the same promise to Sarah that he had made to Abraham last chapter. Sarah will have a son next year.

B. Why do we laugh?

And, as Abraham laughed in disbelief last chapter, Sarah laughs here in disbelief. Why? Because literally the text reads that Sarah "no longer experienced the cycle of women" (Waltke, 268). Sarah's body has zero potential to bear children. Of course she laughs, in pain and hopelessness.

God shows up, reveals his promises to her and how does she respond? In doubt and disbelief!

Of course she laughs. It's absurd! Ninety-year-old women don't have children God. Of course she laughs. So do you and so do I! But, why do we laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord? Why do we laugh at God's revealed promises? We laugh because his promises contradict our circumstances and far exceed our abilities. But, is anything too difficult for the Lord?

As we read at Christmas, a virgin will give birth to a son. Ha ha. Why do we laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

After Jesus is born, the heavenly host sings glory to God in the highest and peace on earth. Peace on earth?! It's absurd! Ha ha. Why do we laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

Easter is coming where a dead man comes back to life after three days in the tomb, after he had promised to? Ha ha. Why do we laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

The church, as the people of God, will help bring peace on earth and will be a source of hope and healing in this world. Ha ha. Why do we laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord? His promises contradict our circumstances and far exceed our abilities.

The spirit is alive in your life and mine, and the gifts of the spirit are emerging in your life and mine. We're being changed and being transformed into his image. Ha ha. Why do we laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

Jesus says, Behold, I am coming soon to create a new heaven and a new earth, where there will no longer be any disease or pain or evil or even death. Ha ha. Why do we laugh? Is anything too difficult for the Lord?

The promises of God contradict our circumstances and far exceed our abilities. We can't make any of this happen! It is all from him, and nothing is too difficult for him. So we trust his promises and throw our entire weight upon them.

What is interesting is that this word "difficult" also has a connotation of "wonderful." So, not only is nothing too difficult for him, nothing is too wonderful for him. When Isaac is born, what a wonderful day that will be.

The meal ends and the three guests get up to leave, verse 16.

IV. The Divine Reflection (16-21)

16 Then the men set out from there, and they looked down toward Sodom. And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. 17 The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, 18 seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? 19 For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him." 20 Then the LORD said, "Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, 21 I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me. And if not, I will know." (ESV)

A. Divine Thoughts

The focus now shifts from an intimate meal to the wicked cities of Sodom of Gomorrah. The destination of these three strangers is those cities, not Abraham's tent. Abraham continues his extravagant hospitality by escorting his guests as they leave. And, they walk to a hill that overlooks the two cities. As they walk, we hear the Lord's thoughts as he reveals his future plans to Abraham. The Lord motions toward Sodom and Gomorrah and explains the gravity of their condition. The two cities are wicked and their sin is grave. God is going to judge them. God is going to destroy those cities. Amos will later say, *"For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets"* (Amos 3:7). Abraham is shown to be a worthy prophet. The Lord reasons that he has chosen Abraham to become a mighty nation and to bless all nations through him. To do this, Abraham must know what righteousness, right-relatedness, and justice, the restoration of right-relatedness, look like, then teach them to his children.

We talked about passing on the faith last week. The expectation in scripture is for one generation to teach God's ways, especially his ways of righteousness and justice, to the next generation. It is a significant charge for all of us, whether we have biological children or not. We all have this great privilege to pass on our faith.

B. Divine Character

But, here we learn two important truths about God:

1. God will thoroughly investigate a crime before passing sentence. This anthropomorphic description of God needing to go investigate, communicates to us that he himself will thoroughly assess a situation before passing judgment. He will not bring judgment on a people that does not deserve it.
2. The living God is not morally neutral. God is not morally relativistic. He is altogether holy. And holiness naturally recoils against all that distorts his perfect design for this planet. God abhors evil, which is good news for us! It means he cares.

God shows up and reveals disturbing news to Abraham. And, how does he respond? Verse 22.

V. The Intercession of Abraham (22-33)

22 So the men turned from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. 23 Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? 24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? 25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" 26 And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

27 Abraham answered and said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. 28 Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking. Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." 29 Again he spoke to him and said, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." 30 Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." 31 He said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." 32 Then he said, "Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it." 33 And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham, and Abraham returned to his place. (ESV)

A. The Questioning

After the divine reflection, the two men, called angels in the next chapter, now depart and head for Sodom to investigate, while God, himself, stays with Abraham. And, Abraham, disturbed by God's declaration of judgment, questions God about that judgment. He begins by asking if God will sweep away the righteous with the wicked? And, he begins with 50. What if there are 50 righteous people in the city, God? Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked, if 50 people are found there? God answers, "I will not destroy it." Abraham, though dust and ashes, whittles the numbers down from 45, to 40, to 30 to 20 to 10. In the end, God agrees to spare the thousands for the sake of just a few. God and Abraham then part ways.

We typically notice how the wickedness of a few can permeate throughout an entire group. Here, we see the opposite: the righteousness of just a few can prevent a society from the destructive effects of its own evil ways. This text shows how important the presence of the righteous are in any situation, and provides hope even in the bleakest of circumstances.

B. The Purposes of the Questioning

Abraham's questioning, done very humbly, serves two purposes:

1. Abraham wants to know what kind of God this God? He asks, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just*" (25). Abraham must find out what kind of a God he has attached himself to, especially in terms of judgment. The character of God is at stake. Is this God a monster? And Abraham wants to get the facts straight. Abraham is desperate to understand. The amazing thing is that God has initiated and has invited Abraham into conversation.

This is instructive for us. We can follow Abraham's lead here. As active partners in relationship with the living God today, God invites us into conversation with him to probe his nature and character as well.

2. And, two, notice Abraham's questioning of God's character is also intercession on behalf of the people of Sodom. And God takes seriously Abraham's input. Abraham becomes a participant with God in matters of divine mercy and judgment.

It tells me we have the potential to influence the living God. Intercessory prayer is one of our great privileges of God's people. We are invited into God's board room to deliberate with him on matters of great consequence. And, God takes our input seriously. Why? Because he takes us and our relationship with him seriously! Our prayers have the capacity to shape the future.

Last week at the baptism, one of the men from City Team shared his story. And, he shared how he grew up in the church, but because of some poor decisions involving drugs, he became homeless. He ended up in a coma in the hospital. And, then, he said this, "Someone must have been praying for me, because I came out of my coma, and God led me to City Team." I have no doubt someone was praying for him.

Another of the baptizees from City Team was Victor. Victor's family filled the first row of chairs. As I was welcoming Victor's daughter, she said to me, "we've been praying for this moment for a long, long time."

Intercessory prayer is one of the most important activities in which we can participate. James says, "*The genuine and persistent prayers of God's people are powerful and effective*" (James 5:16).

C. The Results of the Questioning

God showed up and initiated conversation with Abraham. And, how does Abraham respond? He responded by probing God's character through intercession for the people of Sodom. And, through the conversation, Abraham discovered that God's justice is indeed just. He discovered that his justice does not drown out his mercy. In fact, God's mercy is far, far greater than Abraham had ever imagined. This God is willing to spare the thousands for the sake of a few! Abraham learned who this God was. God was no monster. He was full of mercy.

D. My Questioning

But, the question that I have is why did Abraham stop at ten? Why didn't he continue below ten? Abraham was satisfied with his answer and could walk away. What if we, living 4000 years later, were to continue asking the question? After all, God has invited us into these kinds of conversations. Where would it lead us?

Lord, I know we are only dust and ashes, but if you find nine righteous in our world, would you spare the billions upon billions? God's answer? Yes. What about eight, or seven or six or five or four or three or two or one? Lord, would you spare the billions upon billions for the sake of the one righteous person? God's answer. Yes. I would spare the billions upon billions for the sake of one righteous person. Ok. So who is the one? Who is the one righteous person? Because Paul tells us in Romans, repeating the Psalmist, "*There is no one righteous, no not one*" (Rom 3:10). There is no one righteous!

And, here, we are led to the very heart of our faith.

Because God first loved us –

and because he desires to spare the world of his just judgment –

and because he is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" toward his image-bearers who justly deserve his judgment –

God himself, becomes that one, the one righteous person (Ex 34:6).

The holy God becomes one of us! Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham, lives the one righteous life. And he becomes the one righteous person for whom countless of billions of unrighteous people are spared. You and I can have life eternal on account of one human being, Jesus Christ.

But, that speaks to only God's mercy. What about his just judgment? How does the Holy God then deal with the sin of all the unrighteous people?

Where is his just judgment? It is this, once again from the pen of Paul, "*He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf*" (2 Cor 5:21). On that Roman cross, Jesus Christ, the righteous one, took upon himself what should have been given to all the unrighteous. The judge of the universe took upon himself what should have come to you and me. The one took the place of the many. The great exchange has taken place. Christ takes our sin upon himself!

Isa 53:5-6:

5 *he was pierced for our transgressions,
 he was crushed for our iniquities;*

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,

...
6 *the LORD has laid on him*
 the iniquity of us all.

Christ takes our sin upon himself, and we receive his righteousness, so that when God looks at us, as Barth said, “We are justified. We are no longer sinners, for where we are, there stands Another. God looks at this Other.” (Barth, 151). God looks upon the righteous one who took our place. (Thanks to Darrell Johnson for helping me see this connection).

The cross of Jesus is both God’s boundless love for sinners, and God’s complete hatred of sin. It is both God’s mercy and God’s justice. Where have we been led? We’ve been led to the very foot of the cross. This is where any discussion of God’s character inevitably leads.

How do you respond to this?

VI. Communion

A. Communion Introduction

Well, today, we get to respond, in the best way possible, with communion, where we remember the cross and the great exchange. God loved us and gave himself for us (Eph 5:2). And, we return to Rublev’s Icon.



This icon actually does double duty, for the icon is *also* called *The Holy Trinity*. Rublev drew two scenes into one icon, Abraham’s hospitality and divine hospitality. For with this description of the icon, we find the Trinitarian God extending his heart and hands to us. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is our host, and he invites us to share a meal with him, even to share his very life with him. As you can see, the side of the table closest to us is empty to include one more person. That’s you. And, You can see on the table a rectangular box in the front. That box is thought to have had a mirror attached to it at one time, so every person looking at the icon could see themselves sitting at the table with the Trinitarian God. For we were once the strangers, excluded from the covenants of promise, having no hope, but because of divine

hospitality demonstrated through the blood of Jesus, we've been brought near, even into the very life of God (Eph 2:12-13).

All those who trust Jesus as Lord and Savior are invited to respond today to this divine hospitality.

B. Communion Instructions

Let me first give the instructions. I'm going to have the servers go to their respective places. There are 5 stations. This one in the center is the gluten free station. Traffic flow works best if the first pews up front, and last pews in the back go first to their respective stations. And, the next pews follow, moving backwards from the front and forwards from the back. Go to your station, take a piece of bread and dip it in the juice and eat. Do not drink from the cup. Please return by the center aisle.

C. Communion Prayer

Let's pray. Father, we praise and thank you for loving us and giving all of yourself to us in your Son Jesus Christ. We do not presume to come to your table, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your all-embracing love and mercy. We are not worthy even to gather the crumbs under your table, but it is your character to always show mercy. Grant us, therefore, God of mercy, so to eat at this, Your table, that we may receive in spirit and in truth the body of Your dear Son, Jesus Christ, and the merits of His precious blood, so that we may live and grow in His likeness and, being forgiven, washed and cleansed through His most precious blood, we may evermore live in You and You in us. Amen.

D. Communion Words of Institution (1 Cor 11:23-26, ESV)

[23](#) ... The Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread,
[24](#) and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said,
"This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
[25](#) In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying,
"This cup is the new covenant in my blood.
Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."
[26](#) For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Benediction from Ephesians 3

[16](#) May he grant you, according to the riches of His glory, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18](#) may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19](#) and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. [20](#) Now He is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, for nothing is too difficult for him, [21](#) to Him be the glory in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Resources

Barth, Karl. *Dogmatics in Outline*

Freitheim, Terence. *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith*

Johnson, Darrell W. *Regent MP3 3690H*

Waltke, Bruce. *Genesis: A Commentary*

White, John. *Daring to Draw Near*