

What Happens When God Shows Up

Genesis 18: 1-15

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 12th June 2005

This was not the first time Abraham encountered Yahweh. Twenty-five years earlier, to be exact, Yahweh spoke to Abraham; then he was known as Abram. We don't know much about his life before that time, other than he was from Ur (in modern-day Iraq) and settled in Haran. It is in Haran, living a settled life, where he put down roots surrounded by his kindred where he encountered Yahweh. He was seventy-five, his wife, Sarai, was ten years younger. She could not conceive a child and perhaps they resigned themselves to this fact. Then it happened, completely out of the blue, Yahweh spoke of two earth-shattering, unsettling events that will transpire. First, Abram is called to "Go." Where, we're not sure. But he called to go. When he goes he must leave *everything* behind – his homeland, his family, even the security of his father's house. He must leave it all and set out to a new place. And then Yahweh makes this outlandish claim: after they arrive, this barren couple will produce not one child or two, but a whole nation through which God will bless all the families of the world (Genesis 12: 1-4).

Now it is twenty-five years later, Abraham and Sarah are even older, they've settled in the land of Canaan, adjusted quite nicely, going about their ordinary, domesticated lives knowing they have been faithful to Yahweh, but no sign of children. They have given up on that promise, resigned themselves to living a barren life. By this time Sarah is post-menopausal and Abraham is no spring-chicken. Maybe Abram at seventy-five was a little hard of hearing and didn't get the message right about children. Maybe it was a dream. Abraham appears to be minding his own business, perhaps enjoying old age. He's having a quiet afternoon near the Oaks of Mamre, near the entrance to their tent and Sarah is further back in the tent, maybe taking a nap, trying to hide from the sun. But once again, just when everything seems to be normal, living ordinary, routine lives, expecting little and satisfied with that they have, Yahweh appears.

The text isn't clear if Yahweh was alone or had two men, possibly angels with him, for it says both. Maybe in the heat of the sun it looked like three men appeared instead of one. The text doesn't say.

The first eight verses of chapter 18 move along at a fast clip. Abraham offers a little water to wash their feet and allows them to rest. He offers to provide a little bread, to provide rest for their ongoing journey, never presuming that he is the object of their visit. A little water, a little food – these are all understated offers of hospitality, because then Abraham throws the ovens of the kitchen on full heat. He does everything to make his guests feel welcomed, unhurried, relaxed. But behind the scenes he's sending everyone off to mix the flour and knead the bread and tells Sarah to put a cake in the oven. Abraham quickly runs off to the herd to get a calf – tender and good – and gives it to the servant to prepare it. Then they fetch something to drink. All this flurry of activity is going on.

This reminds me of the hospitality offered to me when I was in the Congo last summer. One night we went out with some of Don's friends in a very poor neighborhood of Kinshasa. We were at an outdoor street café where food was served. We were told to relax. Even though

they served goat there at the café, our hosts sent a family member miles away to the best butcher in town and came back with fresh, grilled goat – fresh goat. He came back about two hours later with fresh grilled goat, goat that was alive three hours earlier, the most succulent cut of meat. In fact there were many meals in the Congo that were feasts – where most people live on one meal a day, our hosts provided enough food to feed their families for a month and they did it with such grace and ease. This was especially true of the elders of Nganza Centrale Presbyterian Church and the women of the church the Sunday we presented the motorcycle to them.

Abraham provides an enormous feast for his guests and makes it look easy. It is a feast for Yahweh and friends. The author of this story goes to great lengths to demonstrate Abraham's generosity and welcome. This is because in Abraham's world *hospitality was the primary act of a civilized people*.¹ Abraham and Sarah's actions are in sharp contrast with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in the next chapter who were not hospitable to their guests, leading many to believe that this was the real sin of these cities, inhospitality. Not so with Abraham and Sarah.

After they ate the guests wanted to speak with Sarah, who was in the tent. One man says to Abraham when he returns next year Sarah will be pregnant and have a son. Can you imagine their shock? Those of you who are seventy or eighty or ninety or close to one hundred, what would you have said? Sarah, overhearing the conversation from the tent, laughs to herself about the whole affair. I'm sure she got a pretty good laugh out that prediction. But Yahweh wasn't laughing. Yahweh says to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for Yahweh? At the set time I will return to you in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." Then Sarah comes out of the tent and denies it, "I didn't laugh," for by this time she was afraid. Then Yahweh said, "Oh yes, you did."

This is an extremely old story, definitive for the Hebrew people and for all those blessed through the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah – meaning Muslims and Christians. What makes this text so significant is that here we are given further insight to the nature and style of Yahweh. To reiterate the important point I stressed last week in the sermon on Luke 15, we don't go to scripture to find role models after which we might try to live faithful lives. Scripture is not a morality tale and its stories should not be reduced to moralisms – although that is happening all the time these days in our society and in some churches where the Bible is abused and with it people who are mishearing the primary driving force of the text. The Bible is full of questionable characters, shady figures, less-than-stellar personalities, including murderers whom Yahweh chooses over others to be the means through which Yahweh's redemption comes to fruition. Think of Moses! When the Bible focuses upon human action it usually highlights human failings and inadequacies in order to make the more important point that Yahweh is not like you and me – *which is very good news, indeed!* The Bible is all about Yahweh: *Yahweh's* actions in the world, *Yahweh's* determination to save and redeem, *Yahweh's* determination to provide a future for all people in the midst of their sufferings and hurts and crosses. Scripture,

¹ Commentary of Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*. Cf. the quotation in the worship bulletin: "We saw a stranger yesterday/ We put food in the eating place,/ Drink in the drinking place,/ Music in the listening place,/ And with the sacred name of the triune god/ He blessed us and our house,/ our cattle and our dear ones./ As the lark says in her son:/ Often, often, often goes the Christ/ In the stranger's guise." Celtic rune of hospitality. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), pp. 85-88.

this text are all about Yahweh – it tells us what kind of God this is who associates with human beings.

And it goes even further. At the heart of this text, at the center of Israel's long history with Yahweh, at the core of every Gentile's struggle to believe the claims of the Christian community is the crucial question: *Will we allow God to be God?* Yahweh hears Sarah's silent, mocking ridicule of the divine announcement. Yahweh knows what is in her heart of hearts. At stake here is not a question of whether Sarah has enough faith or not. This is not a test to see if Sarah and Abraham will prove faithful; if so they will then have children and fulfill God's purpose. Don't focus on Abraham and Sarah, but upon God.

Is anything too wonderful for God? That's how the NRSV puts it. The brilliant, leading Old Testament scholar of our age, Walter Brueggeman prefers this reading: "Is anything too hard for Yahweh?" In fact, he makes the strong case that everything in the narrative revolves about this pivotal question. It might even be the fundamental question of the Bible.² And note it is not a human question. It is not an expression or question of human credulity or incredulity – which really doesn't matter. It is *God's* question directed right to us: *Is there anything too hard for Yahweh?* Be careful how you answer this question. To say, *Yes*, then God is not God. To say, *No*, then be prepared for something radically different.

But before you answer, it needs to be stressed that Yahweh doesn't say their future depends upon their ability to believe. This is not about modes of faith or disbelief. Yahweh will not be thwarted by human actions, Yahweh will not be limited by human beings who simply do not "get it" and who refuse to let "God be God." As Brueggemann so eloquently put it, the "powerful promise of God *outdistances* their ability to receive it."³ God's ability to open a future for them does not depend upon the readiness of Abraham and Sarah to receive it. *Is there anything too hard for Yahweh?* Have an answer yet?

Before you answer, remember this is all about God. And it is good to remember this because it will be easy to see this text about the possibility of having a child. This is not about infertility, although it is about a kind of barrenness. God doesn't promise every woman, sadly, the capacity to have a child, nor does God promise, sadly, every married couple the opportunity to have a child. We can't take this text and its question, "Is anything too difficult for God?" as a way of saying that God can do whatever we ask if we only believe that God is strong enough to make it happen. And then when our prayers or hopes are not realized blame ourselves for not trusting God enough. This only leads to a spiraling down towards despair. It is easy to read this text this way, but it is wrong. *Yahweh doesn't promise us everything.*⁴ *But we are promised the land (which is another way of saying we are promised a home), and a people (which is a way of saying we won't be alone, we will have a community), and a future (which is a way of saying the suffering and pain and crosses of this world will not have the last word).*

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis – Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 159. I am indebted to Brueggemann's powerfully insightful reading of Genesis.

³ Brueggemann, pp. 157ff.

⁴ Brueggemann, p. 161.

In order to reach the land and become a people and have a future requires an openness to the *impossible possibilities of Yahweh* – and don't think this is easy, because it is not. Dealing with Yahweh is not easy because Yahweh is always breaking out of the parameters we consider reasonable or wise or moral or plain common sense. "Faith is not a reasonable act which fits into the normal scheme of life and perception. The promise of the gospel is not a conventional piece of wisdom that easily accommodates to everything else. Embrace of this radical gospel [– getting mixed up with this Yahweh character –] requires shattering and discontinuity. Abraham and Sarah have by this time become accustomed to barrenness. They are resigned to a closed future. They have accepted that hopelessness as 'normal.'" They are stuck in what Brueggeman calls "resistant hopelessness" and will not embrace Yahweh's promise – because it simply is too tough, no wonder Sarah laughed.⁵ It is the silent laugh of disbelief. Suddenly, this old couple from the past now sound oddly contemporary.

I can't help but be struck by the contrast of Abraham and Sarah welcoming the divine guests, but not welcoming their message. I wonder if we're not like them at times. I can imagine Yahweh saying, "*You welcome me and feed me, entertain and make me feel at home, you ask for my presence and I grant it. Yet when I tell you what I'm about to do, when I show you the way in which the promise will be fulfilled, when I'm about to give you a future, you laugh at me and mock me.*" Is this what God thinks about us? We say we're people of faith, but how far are willing to live it out? How committed are we? Are we really open to the shattering and discontinuity that come with following Yahweh? Are we stuck in the realm of the reasonable and normal, where 1 + 1 always equal 2, instead of living God's way where 1 + 1 can equal 3? Are we limited by the moral and the wise, playing it safe, saying, 'That's good enough.'? Do we really, honestly believe in the impossible possibilities of Yahweh? Is anything too hard for Yahweh?

How do we answer this question? We answer it with the way we live – by not putting limits upon what God can do and what God can do through people. To turn it around, where are you putting limits on people and God, withholding support or withholding love or withholding hope? Do we see the possibility and the potential in people and situations? As we raise our children, plan our futures, care for our parents, seek restoration or healing or forgiveness – Is there anything too hard for God? How about when we put the church's budget together for the year leaving no room for the impossible, limiting everything, including God to the realm of the possible, the reasonable, and the calculable? Is anything too hard for God? When we dream of a future for the church are we open to shattering and discontinuity, new ways, new sounds, new approaches to serving God or are we guilty of resistant hopelessness? What will you say? Is there anything too hard for God? Is there?

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

⁵ Brueggemann, pp. 158-159.