

God's Friend & Confidant

Trinity CRC, September 30, 2018 PM
Summer series, Abraham

Genesis 18:1-15
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Dear Congregation,

Are you a friend of God? Can you imagine being a confidant of God? Someone who the Lord God Almighty shares His secrets or plans with? Abraham was. And I'm sure that if you asked him, Abraham would say that walking and talking with the Lord makes everything else pale by comparison. Abraham brings to mind, perhaps, thoughts of a spiritual giant. He's the father of all believers. It sounds so impressive. And truly it is.

But let us never exalt this man to the level of a super-human. Lest all we remember is the strength of his faith, let's also recall the shallowness, the weakness, the frailty of his faith. Indeed, as we see Abraham in Genesis 18, he is a man of God with strong faith proved or authenticated by his actions. But he once was where you perhaps feel that you are. Don't forget that Abraham has now walked with God for 25 years! He may look strong now, but he wasn't always and, even later, he would have times of doubt and weakness.

The truth is, God had mercy on him and chose him to become the father of a new people, set aside to serve Him. Through trials and temptations, through failures and fumbings, God works with Abraham to strengthen his faith. God wants to get close to Abraham and everything that has happened to Abraham until now lays the groundwork for the friendship between God and His friend Abraham.

As you sit here this evening, you must know that God wants to be your friend too! He works in your life because of His covenant faithfulness. He wants to come for dinner to fellowship with you, even if you aren't aware of it.

God came to dine with Abraham. In some sense, this visit was another test, another chance for Abraham to show his faith by his works but it was also much more than that.

Moses, the writer of the first five books of the Bible, introduces the story to the reader saying,

Gen 18:1 THE LORD appeared to Abraham near the great tree of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.

If you look back at ch.17:1, we read, "When Abraham was 99 years old, THE LORD appeared to him." Those statements benefit the reader. Here, then, we have the advantage of knowing even before the story begins, that somehow the LORD, our covenant God, is coming to visit Abraham from heaven. But Abraham doesn't know this.

So, try to put yourself in Abraham's sandals. It's about 1 o'clock. He is just finished lunch and now it's siesta time. The middle of the day is too hot to work. So

Abraham is reclining in a chair, maybe even lounging in a hammock, just outside of the tent where he lives. You know the feeling. Your stomach is full. You get comfortable in your chair. You've got a cup of coffee on the table next to you or since it's hot, a glass of water. And before you know it, your eyelids get heavy.

It can happen even on uncomfortable chairs, can't it? It happens even in church, doesn't it? You can't fight it any longer. You close your eyes for just a second, you think, and before you know it, 5 or 10 minutes have passed. And when you open them, the minister is looking right at you from the pulpit!!

That's the kind of feeling Abraham had. His eyes close and his head falls down. When he wakes up, he lifts his head and--surprise--three strange men are standing there. He didn't see them coming towards his place. He didn't hear them coming. But the reader knows that v.1 said, "the Lord appeared to Abraham." These are probably heavenly visitors!

Startled, the 99 year-old Abraham gets on his feet as fast he can, kind of like a soldier rising to attention when an officer enters the room. He's somewhat embarrassed, but never mind now, there's guests to serve!

Abraham recognizes that these men are not from around Mamre. They look important. They are well dressed. And the one in the middle looks like the leader. In a gesture of respect for his visitors, he bows down before them, as if to say, "Abraham, son of Terah, at your service." He's still not aware that God and His messengers stand before him. Abraham is simply being courteous. Hospitality in Mideastern culture is one of the highest virtues.

Abraham the Servant

Abraham's actions show that he is a man of God. The writer of Hebrews in his concluding remarks on Christian living writes,

Heb 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.

The point is not that Christians should be hospitable just because an angel might be making a surprise visit. Rather, we are called to be hospitable, no matter who is knocking at your door. When we show kindness to strangers, we are loving our neighbour as ourselves. When we care for those we don't know and may never see again, then we can have no false motives for our kindness. You see, I can invite my neighbours over for a nice meal, but it won't cost me anything in the long run, because one of these days, they will probably invite me back. But when a stranger comes to town and you serve him as you would like to be served, then you are acting selflessly. Then you are simply being kind without selfish ambition. You have no way of knowing if your favour will ever be returned, but it doesn't matter. You do it anyway.

Abraham does not think of himself this time, like he did when he told Sarai to say to Pharaoh that she was his sister and when he agreed with Sarai to take

Hagar as a second wife. No, Abraham simply meets a need that he knows he can fill, no matter what it costs him. He wants to help wherever and however he can.

He sees a need. Three strangers. It's the middle of a hot day. These men need shade from the heat. They need a drink. They need food for their stomachs if they've been walking all morning. And for their further physical relief, they could use a foot wash to sooth their tired, sandaled, and dusty feet. Abraham is ready to serve these guests to his fullest ability. He does not boast about what he can prepare for them. No, in fact, in verse 5 he offers them something like a sandwich but then after they agree to stay, he fixes a feast as fast as he can. My guess is the lunch guests didn't get served until supper time, judging by the work Abraham put into the meal. But time was not a factor on this occasion. Service was!

Picture it. In the hottest part of the day, Abraham, Sarah and the servants run around to serve these guests. Service is the name of the game in the Kingdom of God. They prepare the best food and spare no expense. And as was customary, Abraham stood while his guest sat and enjoyed their meal.

Is it any wonder, then, that the Lord and Abraham were close? If Abraham would serve complete strangers with such generosity, can you imagine how he would serve his God whom he knows well?

While Abraham may not know who he is serving, we do. And that's part of the strategy the writer uses to draw the reader into the story. We know that these men are God Himself and his angels. And so we ought to think to ourselves how appropriate the meal Abraham has set before them. Elsewhere Moses writes about the offerings the people bring to the Lord. They are just like the ones Abraham prepares for his guests. The best of everything: Lev. 24:5 & 8 says,

Lev 24:5 Take fine flour and bake 12 loaves of bread...⁸ This bread is to be set before the Lord regularly, Sabbath after Sabbath, on behalf of the Israelites, as an everlasting covenant.

And of course, you know that the animal sacrifices were always the finest animals, without spot or blemish. These were pleasing sacrifices to the Lord.

The short of it all is that Abraham puts a meal fit for the Lord before the Lord whom he is kept from recognizing up to now! From the bottom of his heart, and not out of obligation, he gives the best to his visitors, just as we must give the best we have to the Lord.

That may sound strange to our individualistic society. It is strange to anyone still without God and living in sin. But it is God's way. His design. Perhaps you recall a time when Jesus' disciples argued about who was the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus said to them,

If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all. By this, Jesus wants us to know that the deeper our love for God is, the more it will overflow in deeds of kindness to others. Rather than looking to be served, as if we

are most important, we treat others as the most important and we serve them. In that way we prove the strength or quality of our love for God.

So, the first reason we know that there is a strong relationship between God and Abraham is that Abraham is a servant to visitors who he does not know. And from that we can know that He will serve God, who he does know, with even greater devotion.

The Lord's Speaks

But now let's return to the story and see what happens next. Remember, v.8 tells us that while the guests ate, Abraham stood near them under a tree. So, either during or after the meal they talked together.

Watch the conversation carefully. In v.9 the angels ask Abraham, "Where is your wife Sarah?" Now, if you are Abraham, you might have some questions yourself right about now, questions like, "Why are you asking where my wife is? Didn't you hear us in the tent making this meal ready?" And even more, Abraham might have thought, "How did they know my wife's name is Sarah? I didn't tell you that." And they didn't say Sarai. They said Sarah. Even though he answers their question with a straightforward answer, you can be sure that his mind is racing.

The reader of Genesis has seen God ask questions like this before-- questions that He obviously knows the answer to, but He asks them as a conversation starter. Think of God coming to Adam and Eve in the Garden after they sinned, saying, "Where are you?" God knew! And after Cain killed Abel, God came to Cain and said, "Where is your brother Abel?"

What we are about to see is that God's care for Abraham extends to Abraham's family as well. Because of the relationship He has established with Abraham, God reaches out to Abraham's doubting wife as well. God knows that Sarah is still doubtful about the promise. Abraham has obviously told Sarah about his visit with God in ch.17 and the reaffirmation of the promised son. But Sarah still can't believe it. So God comes back for her good this time.

For the sake of Abraham, God speaks to Sarah. In a human body, God comes to let Sarah hear with her own ears that she will have a son. This is further evidence to Abraham that he has visitors from heaven because only God can promise children--for the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Moreover, each time Abraham had been promised to become the father of many nations, God alone has spoken those words to him. Now God is speaking again outside Abraham's tent so that Sarah can hear.

But Sarah laughs in disbelief. When the angels said, "Where is your wife," Sarah's ears perked up inside the tent. "They're asking about me." And then the Lord speaks the news that Sarah will bear a son. Sarah can't believe her ears. Her

good years are past. Abraham might be able to father another child at his age, but she is past menopause. She is just too old. So she laughs.

Can you see her: Sarah, hiding inside the tent with her ear to the wall, hears her name, listens to the message and laughs in her heart. No one hears it except the Lord. He knew she laughed--even if it was an inside laugh. God knows and He immediately question Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, Will I really have a child, now that I am old?" And then the promise is repeated: "I will return next year and Sarah will have a son."

Aware that she had been found out, Sarah is afraid and tries to cover for herself. From inside the tent, I suppose, Sarah shouts, "I didn't laugh!" But it's too late. God heard her. And a quick "Yes you did laugh" settles it. God corrects His child. Doubt and unbelief should not enter our minds for we have a God of His Word. And if we doubt Him, He will correct us too in order to bring us to faith, just as He brought Sarah to faith through this visit.

Because of His promise to Abraham and the friendship they shared, the Lord comes to Sarah and drives away her doubt. The stage is now set for the Lord to fulfill His promise to Abraham. Sarah has learned to trust God. Abraham has learned--and he too had learned the hard way. But now they both know when God speaks, He means what He says and what He says comes to pass.

I'm so thankful that God is patient with us. This story proves again how God must constantly bring us along as He brings His plans for our lives to completion. We keep on getting in His way. But He patiently comes back time and again. How different a picture this is than we might get from someone who want us to believe that God doesn't act because our faith is too weak. Indeed, our faith can always use strengthening. We will never arrive at perfect trust in this world. But God carries out His plans. When we are slow of heart, He comes to our side and speaks a word of admonition or encouragement. His plan moves forward. And being our loving Father, He pulls us along when we are lagging behind.

God loves both Abraham and Sarah and wants them both to be close to Him, walking by faith every step of the way. And that's what He wants for all of us too for that is why He created us.

And we see that even clearer in the last part of this chapter. There is good reason to read these two stories together. This is all part of the same visit by the angels of God to Abraham. This is the part of the chapter where we really see the fruit of a close walk with God. But we will have to wait with that till next week.

For now, though, let us know that if Abraham was a friend of God, we can be too. The God who once came looking like a man to dine with Abraham, later actually did become a man. Jesus Christ, the Son of God came to dine with us. He came and He ate with sinners--tax-collectors, prostitutes and beggars. And He longs to dine with us as well. When the religious leaders of the days pointed to

Jesus eating with these so-called sinners He said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." This is why we are privileged to dine with the Lord as His table, as we did this morning. He feeds us with His grace in order that we will have strength to trust Him, walk with Him and serve others in His name.

By faith in Jesus Christ, we are given a place of honour with the King of kings and Lord of lords. For friendship with God is first of all marked by faith which leads to grateful service for God and our neighbour. In Christ we have everything and therefore we are free to sacrifice it all for the service of others. That's why James in his talk about faith and good deeds also reflects on Abraham saying, "And the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness,...." Then he adds, "and (Abraham) was called God's friend." (Jas.2:23).

So we also may be a friend of God by faith in Jesus Christ. And then God will also work out His plan in our lives and help us in those times when our faith is weak.