

The Lord of Hosts
Genesis 18:1-15
Sermon by Mark Schloneger
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The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little 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." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 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.

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." (Genesis 18:1-15, NRSV)

The great trees of Mamre. This is a significant place in the life of Israel. There is a tradition, cited by the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, that the trees of Mamre are as old as the world itself and another tradition that says these trees mark the spot where the Temple would eventually stand.

But we can see this place's importance just by reading Genesis. In Genesis 13, after Abraham separated with Lot, Abraham moved his tent and settled by the great trees of Mamre. And there, he built an altar to the Lord after God renewed the covenant with him. In Genesis 17, at the great trees of Mamre, God again blesses Abraham and Sarah by promising to give this elderly childless couple many offspring. And here, at the great trees of Mamre, Abraham and his family are circumcised as a sign of their covenant with God.

The great trees of Mamre is a holy place, where God's covenant is renewed, where God is encountered.

Where God is encountered. Think for a moment. Where do you expect to encounter God? How do you expect to encounter God?

Jehovah Sabaoth is the most frequently-used compound name for God in Scripture. It is mentioned over 270 times, and it is translated in our Bibles as “The Lord of Hosts.” Now, the image this title brings to mind is of a powerful warrior, one who fights our battles and is the refuge we can run to in time of need. When David approached Goliath, he responded to Goliath’s trash-talking by saying, ““You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, Jehovah Sabaoth, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (1 Sam. 17:45). The Lord of Hosts is the commander of the powers of both heaven and earth – the Almighty, the Sovereign, and the Powerful God.

When we think of God appearing to human beings in the Bible, we think of those instances that would be fitting for Jehovah Sabaoth. A burning bush that is not consumed. A booming voice that sounds like thunder. A pillar of fire, a cloud of smoke, legions of angels. We think of the God-Who-Knows-How-To-Make-An-Entrance.

For twenty-five years, Abraham and Sarah waited for Jehovah Sabaoth, the God who would set things straight. It had been twenty-five years since the Lord first promised to bless them by making them into a great nation, and, in so doing, bless the whole world. Part of Abraham and Sarah’s struggle was the difficulty of living under this promise amid the ordinariness of life.

And so, maybe it’s surprising how God simply showed up. Not with the pyrotechnics befitting Jehovah Sabaoth, but as strangers walking past their house at two in the afternoon on a Saturday afternoon in the middle of July -- you know, just another day in the midst of their ordinary, everyday lives.

I have titled my message “The Lord of Hosts”, but my title doesn’t refer to English translation of Jehovah Sabaoth. No, it refers to the plainer meaning of the word hosts, as in those who offer hospitality to guests. For God is not only Jehovah Sabaoth – the Lord of hosts -- the commander of the principalities and powers of heaven and earth. God is also the Lord of hosts – the Lord of those who extend welcome and hospitality to unknown travelers, strangers, foreigners and neighbors.

It is 2 p.m. on a Saturday afternoon in the middle of July, and Abraham was sitting outside near the entrance to his tent. Sarah was inside the tent doing what Sarah does, probably working. And, suddenly, Abraham looked up, surprised to see three men standing nearby.

This doesn’t happen every day, but it’s not unusual either. Travelers have to depend on the goodwill of local people.

In the Ancient Near East, hospitality followed strict rules that had to be observed by both the guest and the host. In that culture, hospitality was not something that was given merely out of kindness or charity or concern, it was given because it reflected on the honor and the

reputation of the host. A family's honor was a commodity to protect, and it was a way for collective societies to ensure the well-being of the whole. A person who traveled needed to depend on hospitality of others simply to survive.

And so, when Abraham sees these travelers, these strangers, he does not go inside, close the garage door, and dim the blinds.

No, he runs toward them like they were long lost family members. He bows low to the ground, and pleads with them to give him the honor of serving them. "My lord," he says, "If I have found favor in your eyes, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought to wash your feet, rest under this tree, and let me get you something to eat so you can be refreshed to go on your way."

Everything that Abraham offers is typical of the code of hospitality: the washing of feet, drink, food and shelter. When these strangers accept, then things really spring into action.

The way our text reads, it's a mad dash. Company is coming! Abraham hurries back to the tent to Sarah. Quick, he says to Sarah, bake some bread. Then Abraham ran to the herd of cattle, selected a calf and gave it to a servant. The servant hurried to prepare it. Abraham then brought curds and milk to the guests and accompanied them while they ate.

Now, you may have noticed that up to this point, I have said nothing of the identity of the guests. We the readers of this story know that Abraham has been visited by God, but nothing suggests that Abraham knew it, at least at first.

What began as simply an extension of hospitality to guests ended with a promise that was unbelievable -- "I shall visit you again next year without fail, the guest said, "and your wife will then have a son." Abraham laughed when he heard this promise in chapter 17. Sarah laughed when she overheard this promise while listening at the entrance of the tent. After all, Sarah was past the age of childbearing, and Abraham was old.

And just so you know, God doesn't condemn Abraham and Sarah for their disbelief. He simply reaffirms his promise. "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" Is anything too hard for the Lord?

This is the simple story that began with an offer of hospitality and ended with a promise that transformed Abraham and Sarah's future. We read this story, and we read this as an encounter with God. And that is true. But we shouldn't forget that this encounter with God began with hospitality with three unknown others. How will make room for God?

All through the Scriptures, this practice of hospitality is much more than a duty to share, it's a way to encounter God. Some have called it a sacrament, a means of God's grace to us.

In the New Testament, God comes to human beings just as God did to Abraham and Sarah, as the Lord of hosts, not in the Jehovah Sabaoth sense, but in the sense of the Lord of those offering hospitality to strangers. In Jesus, God comes as a wanderer. “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;” Jesus said, “but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Zacchaeus hosts Jesus, and then becomes radically transformed. You know what Jesus calls him? A child of Abraham. Maybe the great tree of Mamre was the one that Zacchaeus climbed, at least in a metaphorical sense.

On the walk to Emmaus, the two grieving disciples walk and talk with the unidentified stranger on the road, offer him food and lodging, and then realize that they have been with the risen Christ.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells his disciples that he will come to them as hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison. By offering “the least of these” hospitality, Jesus tells them, they will encounter him.

This practice of hospitality runs counter to culture right now. Ours is a fearful and threatened time, when crime, violence, and the threat of terrorism cause us to be apprehensive of the stranger. We don’t pick up phone calls from numbers we don’t know. We install alarm systems and check the locks each night. This past week, I was out running on a rural dirt road, and was a little uneasy when I passed someone walking the same route I was taking. What was he doing way out here? I thought. And he might have been uneasy about me. We have made strangers of most people, and it has left us as strangers not only to ourselves but also to God who appears as stranger.

Miroslav Volf contends that if the healing word of the gospel is to be heard today, we must find ways of speaking that address the hatred of the other. “Increasingly we see that exclusion has become the primary sin, skewing our perceptions of reality and causing us to react out of fear and anger to all those who are not within our (ever-narrowing) circle.” But salvation comes, he says, “not only as we are reconciled to God, not only as we ‘learn to live with one another,’ but as we take the dangerous and costly step of opening ourselves to the other, of enfolding him or her in the same embrace with which we have been enfolded by God.”

Ten years ago, I heard a speaker at the Mennonite convention in San Jose, ask this simple question. Given the growth of the church in the global south, is it possible that immigration is God’s way of renewing the church and spreading the gospel in the United States? That’s a provocative question, I know. The assumptions behind that question mess with our minds, turns our worldview upside down. It assumes we need the gospel, we need renewal. And it assumes that immigrants have something we need that is much more important than their labor. Is it possible? Well, judging from the way God tends to work, yeah, I think it is.

As most of you know, my wife Sarah and I lived for three years in rural Mozambique as volunteers for Mennonite Central Committee. During our first year in Mozambique, I went

through a cultural adjustment that left me lost. I think I had gone through my life up to that point with the ethic: Work hard, be nice, and everything will work out. In Mozambique, I wanted to work hard, but I didn't know what to do, where to begin. I had chickens in my yard, I had lizards on my walls. I thought I was a nice guy, but I would always be an outsider, a guest, an alien living in a foreign land. I prayed over and over to God, but nothing I did seemed to amount to anything. It wasn't working out. I had no idea why I was there. I was failing, and I sunk into what was probably the lowest period of my life.

For a time after we moved to Mozambique, children would line the hedges around our house in hopes that they could see us living our fascinating lives. When we came outside, there they were, watching. They kept their distance, curious but a little fearful.

Enia and Rosita were the exceptions. These two girls came into our yard and played loudly under the thatch roof hut out front. We would go to them and try to talk with them. But they kept their heads down. We'd never get anything more than one-word answers to our questions.

Then, after we left, Enia and Rosita would resume their fun and start playing again. This went on for a few weeks. Then they stopped coming. I forgot about them.

After we had been in Mozambique for about a year, during that low point that I had talked about, a young girl knocked on our door wanting to talk to us. I didn't recognize her, but she introduced herself as Enia. She was twelve years old. Before, she had been a shy girl who kept her head down and wouldn't talk to us. But now here she was -- smiling, laughing, confident.

Enia came inside and told us how much it had meant to her that we allowed her to play in our yard the year before. During that time, she said, our house was the only place where she felt safe. She had been orphaned, and her uncle wasn't treating her very well. She was now living with Catholic nuns and considering becoming a nun herself.

She looked me in the eye – she looked me in the eye – and she told me that she thanked God for us. Sometimes I hesitate to tell this story, because I realize that in and of itself it doesn't sound particularly significant. I can't explain this to you, but I know that this was an encounter with God for me. Through her words, I also heard these words from God: "If I can bless your mindless gesture of goodwill to a child when you aren't even paying attention, think how much more I can accomplish when you are paying attention."

Hebrews, chapter 13, commenting on the story of God's visit to Abraham and Sarah, says, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it."

May we be open to receive the time of God's visitation.