

## Reflection on Genesis 18:1-15

When I read the passage we just heard from Chapter 18 of Genesis, the story of Abraham and Sarah hearing and responding to this amazing promise from the Lord, my thoughts were off and running. Yours might have been as well, because there are many ways to enter into this rich story.

Maybe it was the end of this passage that caught your attention. There is this business of Sarah laughing to herself at this ludicrous proclamation by God promising that she, in her very advanced years, will bear her equally ancient husband Abraham a son. Mind you, immediately before this story, in Chapter 17 of Genesis is another version of God making this promise to Abraham, who is alone with God. In that instance, Abraham laughs because he and Sarah are so old; in fact, Abraham falls on his face and laughs at the news. Plus, Abraham tries to make the case that God should recognize his son by Sarah's servant Hagar, named Ishmael, a name that means "God hears". No, God says, there will be another son with whom God will make a covenant. And this son that Sarah will bear, you will call Isaac - a name that means "he laughs". Right then, we know that God and Abraham have a special relationship and we learn God has a sense of humor. In the version in Chapter 18, Sarah laughs to herself and God hears her. Whoops! You can just imagine the scene, Sarah is out of sight behind the tent flap when God turns to Abraham and wonders why Sarah is laughing at this promise? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? This is the second time this divine promise has been met by human laughter. Sarah is worried and denies she laughed. Sounds like something any one of us might do. "You didn't hear any laughing from me." Fortunately, just as in Chapter 17, there is no holy wrath for Sarah, only God saying, "Oh yes, you did laugh!"

Or perhaps you entered into another facet of this story, one that echoes our discussions earlier this year in the Conversations that Matter forum of how we are called by God to respond to migrants and refugees. There are many places in Hebrew scripture where God admonishes the Israelites to be kind to strangers and refugees, to care for widows and orphans, reminding the nation that "you yourselves were once strangers in the land of Egypt". Here early in Genesis we see the powerful example of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers into their home. Not just welcoming them, but inviting them to wash up before sitting down to a meal of roasted beef with fresh bread, curds and milk. This type of welcome is common in the cultures of the

Middle East, to provide support for travelers in the desert, even the non-divine visitors. It is hospitality.

Hospitality brings to my mind the refuge Rahul Dubey, a resident of Washington, DC, provided to people peacefully protesting the homicide of George Floyd by a police officer. On June 2, when Mr. Dubey, who works in healthcare, heard the flash bang explosions in the street outside his home, he opened the door and waved in the protestors running to escape the police firing pepper spray at them. Suddenly he had over 70 people in his home. He cared for them by providing milk to wash their eyes and gave them whatever food he had, down to the ice cream sandwiches in his freezer. Then he ordered in pizzas. One protestor reported that Dubey gave each protestor his business card, in case they were accused of breaking and entering. He sheltered them until the next morning when the curfew was lifted at 6AM. Rahul Dubey offered hospitality when it was most needed, saying to reporters afterwards "I don't think what I did was anything special. If it is, we have a ton of work to do in this country."<sup>1</sup> Dubey's action notwithstanding, we know now we DO have a ton of work to do in this country.

As interesting as it is to reflect upon the example of hospitality or of Abraham and Sarah and God and laughter, when I read this Genesis story my thoughts immediately focused on the three visitors. Maybe because we are two weeks after Pentecost and one week after Trinity Sunday, three persons turns my thoughts to the Trinity. A careful reading of the passage shows the English translation does not make clear who is whom among these three. Both plural and single pronouns are used by Abraham in speaking with them and the word lord appears in both small case and capitalized. It is complicated. Some commentators pose it is the Lord and two attendant angels, while many others, St Augustine among them, argue this is an encounter with God in the form of the Trinity. In the 15th century, icon writer Andrei Rublev created an image of the three visitors at table in an icon known as *The Trinity* also called *The Hospitality of Abraham*. Perhaps you have seen it. Neither Abraham nor Sarah are depicted. Instead, it shows three winged persons sitting at a table, one raising a hand to bless the cup in the center of the table. There is room at the table for a fourth to sit, as if the viewer is being invited in. When I look at photos of this icon, I see the Trinity as God in relationship, inviting us in.

The Trinity as relationship is calling out to me because it seems like all I knew about how to maintain relationships has been upended. Since mid-March, when public health experts advised us and stay-at-home orders mandated that we physically distance from those not in our own

households, we've all been challenged to maintain relationships differently that we had before - when life was 'normal'. Parents having to become teachers and home spaces having to become workplaces, and everyone being together 24/7 have stretched the bonds between family members. For those of us who live alone, even introverts like myself, the distance brings a different challenge, that of trying to not feel like we are disappearing. This is a time of so many questions.

How do we communicate and nurture relationships in a time when we have to withdraw from each other for our own health and for the health of our neighbors? A time where the NY Times has to publish an illustrated guide to how we might hug safely in a time of COVID.<sup>2</sup> How do we stay in relationship with one another when we have reached this moment in our country's history when our communal sin of racism has been laid bare in a way that we can no longer turn our eyes away? How do we grieve our individual losses of family members or of our own health concerns, or our jobs and our fears about income security? How do we mourn our collective losses like the economic impact to the business landscape of our towns and cities, the loss of cheering on high school teams or graduating seniors, the loss of gathering in our buildings of worship where we could together pray, sing, teach, feed the hungry, pour each other coffee, pass the peace, and most importantly, break the bread and share a cup around a table as the three visitors do in *The Trinity*.

Sure, we have adopted newer technology, bringing workplace tools like Zoom and Go-to-Meeting into our homes, even creating worship gatherings and happy hours. And we have reclaimed old technology - I've heard reports of many more good old-fashioned phone calls between friends and family, some quick to just check on how you are doing, and some lasting much longer as hopes and fears are shared. For myself, I recognize the connecting thread through all of these efforts is intention. I don't know if it feels true for you, but I have become much more intentional. Just as we no longer 'run out to the store' without planning (What is my meal plan for two weeks? Where is my list? Do I have my mask, and my hand-sanitizer?), we have to plan to gather - with whom and how to gather. What we took for granted now requires planning and intention. Not like before, where we planned where to meet for lunch. But which relationships are vital and bring meaning to our lives and which are no longer sustaining? When it comes down to risking your own health or the health of those you live or work with, you make intentional choices.

By the Holy Spirit, we are also connected to each other, woven into relationship with one another. And while the Spirit is always with us, we have to be intentional about that relationship and show up too. Near the end of March, my elderly father who lived in Florida, was hospitalized for a week with COVID19. He was alone in an isolation room and my sister and I could only communicate by phone with the doctor and nurses. At the lowest point for me during that week, I was able to shift my focus from him being alone to the realization that if I truly believe we are connected by the Holy Spirit, then he was not alone, I was with him. And in that moment I physically felt Dad's presence. I was physically reminded again of the Spirit with us by the hospice nurse who called me the evening before Dad died. I asked if there was a chaplain who could be with him. "No, I'm sorry that isn't possible" she said. "But" she continued, "I am a Christian too. And if I may, I believe that if two or more are praying, God is there too. You and your sister are praying, and we nurses are praying, and God is with your father."

So, when I reflect on what transformation I will carry with me into our evolving world as we look for the new normal, I know will it be to be intentional and to show up for my part of the relationship, because the Spirit is always with us.

Amen.

1. NY Times June 3, 2020 Man Shelters Over 70 Protestors Fleeing Arrest in His Washington Home; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/us/rahul-dubey-dc-curfew.html>

2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/well/family/coronavirus-pandemic-hug-mask.html>