

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost • July 21, 2019

Genesis 18:1-15 • Psalm 15 • Colossians 1:15-28 • Luke 10:38-42

The theologian Karl Barth once remarked, “I take the Bible far too seriously to take it literally.” Many of us feel the same way. Not just because we don’t read every single word of the Bible literally. But also because sometimes we take scripture *too* seriously. When we handle scripture, we put on kid gloves. When we talk to it, we speak in hushed tones. Scripture is serious so when we read scripture, we have to be serious, too.

The irony is that taking scripture seriously can actually keep us from reading it faithfully. Sometimes you’re meant to argue with scripture. Sometimes you’re meant to cry with it. Sometimes we are meant to laugh with it. Today’s reading from Genesis is a good example of that. This is a reading that’s meant to be playful. It’s full of word plays and winking references. To make the playfulness of the story clear, we read a different translation today. Instead of the NRSV, we heard from a new translation of the Hebrew Bible by Robert Alter, who is a professor of Hebrew at U.C. Berkley. We’re using this translation because I want you to see how the playful the text is. Because if you try to be serious when you read it, you don’t just miss the jokes. You miss the point, too.

Abraham and God have something of a history at this point. They have a covenant, a promise. God has promised Abraham that he will be the ancestor of multitudes who will be a blessing to the nations. And God has promised Abraham that they will inherit the land of Canaan. For Abraham and Sarah, the promise of descendants and land are symbols that their lives meant something. That they have some kind of legacy. That their lives are something more significant than the grains of sand that they live on.

You don’t have to sympathize with their wants to understand their desires. We all want something similar. To feel like life has some sort of meaning or purpose to it. We find it in family, in relationships, in work, in our communities, in volunteering, in mentoring, in any of the vocations that we occupy. We can deal with hardship if we think our lives have meaning. But Abraham and Sarah are getting close to the end of their lives and they’re thinking, *It didn’t mean anything*. So Abraham and Sarah have received a promise from God, but the promise hasn’t come to fruition yet.

That’s where today’s reading begins. Abraham is outside his tent. He’s waiting to receive the blessings that God has promised him. Maybe he’s wondering if the promise is real or if God is just stringing him along. And just then, he looks up and sees a group of three men. They’re on a journey somewhere. Their silhouettes are waving in the heat. And Abraham, thinks that these men are angels or something. God often appears in the form of angels and messengers in the Hebrew Bible.

So think about what’s going through Abraham’s head. He’s thinking, *Maybe I can remind them of the covenant. But what if they just walk by? I need to keep them here for a minute*. So Abraham goes to the three men and says, “Let a little water be fetched and bathe your feet... and let me fetch a morsel of bread.” He’s basically saying, “Wow. You all look really tired. Why don’t you stop for a minute and rest your feet. I have some trail mix and water in the tent.”

And then look what Abraham actually does. He runs back into the tent and yells, “Hurry!” He’s trying to play it cool but he’s actually panicking. He tells Sarah to make bread from three seahs of flour. That’s about six gallons of flour. So this is an absurd amount of bread. He has the best calf slaughtered and prepared. He brings out a bunch of milk. He brings out a bunch of curds. Abraham says, “Let me see if I have anything in the fridge,” and then he sets out a feast that would make Julia Child jealous.

So what Abraham does is provide hospitality for God. Which is kind of funny to think about. What does it mean to provide hospitality for God? We’re used to God being hospitable to us.

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The feeding of the five thousand. The Last Supper. You set a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. And we're used to people providing hospitality for other people. We have coffee hour and receptions and meals together and all those other things where instead of just saying that someone is welcome, we show them. Usually with food. But what does it mean for people to be hospitable to God? How do you offer hospitality to God?

Well, this is why you have to be a little playful. Who are the people who show up at Abraham's tent? It's God. Verse 1. "The LORD appeared to Abraham." But from Abraham's perspective, when Abraham looks out over the haze of the desert heat and sees these three men walking toward him, does he know if they are God? Sometimes he acts like they're strangers. And sometimes he acts seems like they're God. So which is it? Strangers or God?

The answer, of course, is both. When God shows up, God is hidden. There's not a big neon sign that says, "This is God." God shows up as a stranger. So the way you treat strangers is the way you treat God. When you tell strangers that they can't have a morsel of bread or that they need to go back to where they came from, that's what you're telling God. But the opposite is true, too. When you create a new relationship with a stranger, you are welcoming God. You are creating space for God to become more tangible in the world. You are making it possible for other people to trust in God. We love God by loving strangers.

So God and Abraham are sitting outside eating this big feast that Abraham and Sarah have prepared. If you're Abraham, you're probably feeling proud that you pulled this whole thing off. And God remarks between bites, "Where's Sarah?" Like, *I know you didn't make all this food by yourself.* And when Abraham concedes that Sarah's in the tent, God says, "Your wife Sarah shall have a son." So now Abraham knows he's talking to God. And he knows that God hasn't forgotten the covenant they made. The promise is still there. It hasn't come to fruition yet. But the future is still open to this new reality that God is creating. There's still some reason for hope.

Meanwhile, Sarah is eavesdropping behind the flap of the tent. And Sarah hears this promise that she is going to bear a child. And what does she do? She laughs to herself. And she thinks, here's Alter's translation, "After being shriveled, shall I have pleasure, and my husband is old?" "Pleasure" in Hebrew is *'ednah*, which is a cognate of "Eden." So, again, there's some word play here. Sarah is implying that she no longer has the kind of life that God originally intended. In other words, she says, "I am too old to have a child, Moses is too old to have a child, and I don't find any pleasure in sex." God takes all that in and looks at Abraham and says, "Sarah thinks she's too old to have a child." Notice that God leaves off all of Sarah's complaints about Abraham. The famous rabbi Rashi, who lived in France about a thousand years ago, speculated that God left the parts about Abraham out "for the sake of peace." God's trying to keep them from fighting. So whenever people tell you the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, you can tell them about this story where God plays the role of marriage counselor.

If you read it seriously, you miss all that. But when you read it playfully, suddenly Abraham and Sarah become real people. The thing that's constraining Abraham's vision is anxiety. He's afraid. He's afraid he's going to do the wrong thing and lose the promise from God. So when God shows up, he's running around making this big feast. Like, *We gotta make sure God has enough bread.* But Sarah's different. Sarah doesn't think she's going to do the wrong thing. Sarah thinks she's wrong as a person. Abraham thinks I'm going to do something wrong. Sarah thinks I am wrong. Abraham is anxiety. Sarah is shame.

But look at how God responds to Sarah's doubts, to Sarah's sense of shame. God says, "Is anything beyond the LORD?" So what God says is that your vision is not the same as my vision. You have gone through your life and you don't see any meaning in it. You don't see any purpose at

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the end of it. You think your life doesn't have meaning because you are the wrong kind of person. You have built a set of expectations about what is possible in life. But your vision is too narrow. God's imagination is not constrained by your vision. This blessing coming to fruition does not depend on your trust in it. It depends on God.

Maybe when you read this story, you feel like Abraham. You think *My life is equally balanced between joy and despair, and my next choice is going to shift the balance.* Or maybe you feel like Sarah. You think, *It doesn't matter what I do. It is impossible for my life to have any meaning. I'm just trying to get through life.*

Our anxiety and our shame aren't impossible for God to overcome. Sarah does end up having a child. Her life, which she thinks is meaningless, ends up blessing an infinite number of people. And more than that, an infinite number of strangers. People Sarah didn't know. People like you and me. And one of those people, one of her descendants, turns out to be Jesus. See, people always think Abraham is the one who shows hospitality in this story. But Sarah does, too. Because of God's covenant, Sarah's life ends up changing the world for all of us.

A new world full of hospitality is possible. And it comes to fruition whenever, like Sarah, we believe that what God says about us is actually true.

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