

September 4, 2016 “Pass it On: Welcoming Strangers” Genesis 18:1-11
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore **Rev. Dr. Tom Blair**

‘Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.’ (Hebrews 13:2)

This is the ‘operative’ verse for us today, which leads us into our next sermon series “Pass It On”, (as – as in the song you used to sing around the campfire ‘It only takes a spark to get a fire going’... remember that one?)

The source of this story about welcoming strangers comes from the Old Testament, from mid-way through the epic saga of Genesis- as we are given a glimpse of a surprising, even world-changing encounter that involves our Great Grandfather and Great Grandmother in the faith, Abraham and Sarah.



This story sets the tone for God’s way of interacting with all people, from then onwards, even down to today.

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.

The Lord said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

This new sermon series comes to us from a couple of sources. I didn't dream it up on my own. Over a year ago our Session approved a motion for us to focus on membership; increasing participation, renewing old connections with members and developing new ones. So our theme “Pass it On,” makes perfect sense.

About that same time, the Moderator of our Denomination came to speak at a Presbytery meeting. In his Q & A session he chimed in as to why he believes, in this time of apparent decline in church attendance nationally, we as the Presbyterian Church USA are uniquely positioned for growth. His three reasons included that we present a ‘safe place’ to ask questions – we are ‘a church without walls’; our mission and outreach extends far beyond this sanctuary, and- (most pertinent here), we are a welcoming church, open to all. We all have questions. We all want to reach out. We all want to grow.

Frankly, we're not the only welcoming church around—and that's a good thing, particularly because the Gospel, and the entire Bible, really, is rooted in what a true and sincere welcome means.

Our story from Abraham and Sarah gets the ball rolling. As it unfolds it begins with a twist, something unusual, quite out of the ordinary. Just as the story opens, we read two sentences, one right after the other that seem at odds; they don't necessarily make sense, or fit together without a deeper understanding of what's going on here.

“The Lord appeared to Abraham...”

“He looked up and saw three men.”

In order to understand this, you have to presume that the Lord is embodied in these three men, yet unknown to Abraham, standing right before him. This is reinforced by Abraham's swift and deliberate action- he bows down to them. The strangers are holy emissaries of God. How did he know that?

Paintings of this event often show angels wings on the backs of these unnamed guests. Who knows if that were so?



This scene is a dramatization of the inscrutability of God; the way of God unknowable, unpredictable, free, open, present and inviting. God showing up at your door, for goodness' sake! (Like the Comcast guy?)

The second scene of this passage, equally striking, announces Sarah's pregnancy- to her and Abraham's total astonishment! That this was news to her makes sense enough because

of her age; that it took place was all the more incredible.

The underlying question the Lord asks in response to Sarah's response: - the punch line of the whole story- **'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?'** is far more than a rhetorical question.

It is a question that really begins here and echoes throughout the Bible and into the pages of our lives. Maybe it's the question that will echo through this entire sermon series. "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Good question.

In response to the angels' announcement... What does Sarah do? (laugh) What kind of laugh do you think it was? (just a little giggle, a 'tee hee hee', or a guffaw?)

However it sounded- what ever was underneath that laugh; doubt, surprise, hope, fear, disbelief, incredulity... all those reactions were wrapped up in the new life she was to live in front of her.... None of it was to be left behind, abandoned or forgotten..., all of it was to be incorporated into how she would walk into the new life ahead of her.

So in hearing this story, we ourselves are given a choice. "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

If we think that, well, yes, there are some things that are just too much, too wonderful for the Lord to do... then we close ourselves off to the future that God has in store for us and we place our trust, not in God, but in ourselves, our own resources, only what it is we can do, - which is surely limited by time, resources and visions yet beyond us. If we believe that there are things too wonderful for the Lord to do, we leave ourselves alone and isolated from new possibilities outside us.

But if we accept that what the angel said was true—that there is nothing too wonderful for the Lord, then we open ourselves up to a new future, guided by the Spirit, open to hope, love and welcome.

I am becoming more and more convinced that how we live our lives all comes down to how we know ourselves to be welcomed by God. For how we know ourselves welcomed by God reflects back on how we welcome others. How we understand ourselves to be walking daily, living in God's presence each and every moment, each and every day, welcomed into God's presence in the daily lives we live.



Much has been made of late of the word privilege. It's been a 'buzz word' of sorts, through this summertime. This week I've been thinking about it in a different way; in a way that brings us together as a people called by God, not by who we are or aren't, but out of who God is...

If we believe that it is in the nature of God to be welcoming, loving, accepting, forgiving, surprising in grace and mercy: that there is nothing too wonderful for the Lord to do, then I think we all have to understand and accept that welcome to us as well, whoever we are; whatever we've done. And when we accept that welcome we can begin to live more at peace with ourselves and others.

Take some time to ponder these questions. Remember what events surrounded them for you, and why they come back to you in your memories....

- When have you most felt a stranger?
- When have you been most welcomed?

What stood out in these events as signs of God's presence in your life there and then?

How can those happenings be translated into the life you are living now?

If we can be fully accepted by God and welcomed at this table, how can we not share that same welcome with others? We are welcomed, just as we are, a little tired or a little grumpy, sad or anxious, thankful or resentful.

Jesus welcomes us all, and in this meal shares with us all we need, forgiveness, hope, promise, togetherness and peace. It is a gift for today, tomorrow and always. Thanks be to God. Amen.