

Genesis 18:1-16
Welcome Bread
Sunday March 5th, 2017

In 2014 my wife and I led a trip to Israel where we got to taste, literally taste a modern version of Mideast hospitality that we read about in our Old Testament reading today. I volunteered to be the bus leader on this trip, little knowing all the work, and how little time to prepare there was when we got there, but that is another story. As bus leaders we were upgraded on hotel rooms, meals etc. This was most evident on our visit to the site of the ancient city of Jericho.

When it was time for lunch we gathered with all the rest of the people in this great big cafeteria like place and were about to sit down when our guide called us aside. At first I thought, "Oh no. What did we do wrong, but then we were escorted into a private room and the first course of a many course meal was served.



I didn't realize it was just the first course, because there was so much food there for all of us, I thought that was it, but then the second course arrived and the third and finally desert. I could hardly move I was so stuffed.

I asked my guide about this and was told this is Mid-east hospitality. We as an entire group experienced this at other sites, the most memorable one being at Bethlehem,



where we were the only group in a gigantic banquet hall with linen table clothes, napkins and china plates and it was only lunch time.

Indeed, some cultures are known for their hospitality. Welcoming and hospitality is a 4000 year old tradition in the Judeo/Christian faith traditions.

Hospitality is one of the great themes of the Bible. In our reading, Abraham and Sarah welcomed 3 strangers to their tent.



They were practicing the ancient law of the desert, which required that if a stranger appeared at your tent, you were to welcome them and give them food, drink, and shelter.

It was a matter of survival that people depended on as they traveled in the desert. To welcome someone into your tent meant that you provided them not only with food and water, but also protection. Sharing food was a token of friendship, a covenant of commitment. To refuse to offer hospitality was seen as a hostile act, an affront that could lead to violence.

But that wasn't why you welcomed strangers. And, you didn't do it for what you would get in return. You did it to protect your honor and reputation, and because someday you might be a stranger in need of help yourself.

Abraham and Sarah were gracious hosts, well-versed in the customs of hospitality. Notice how they attended to the needs of their guests:

*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.

Abraham begged these strangers to stay and give him an opportunity to serve them. **He was a Person of Peace to them.** He made them comfortable, providing them water to wash with and a place to relax under his favorite tree.

He served them meat and bread—that substantial bread we heard of on Ash Wednesday—to sustain them on their journey. Good hosts always look to meet the needs of their guests before their own, and find joy in being able to meet them. He stood by them ready to serve as they ate. And then when they did leave he went with them to help them find their way.

As extraordinary as this seems to us, Abraham and Sarah were just doing what was customary and expected. Nothing in the story tells us that Abraham knew the special nature of the guests he was entertaining. But, in being hospitable Abraham and Sarah received a blessing from God. Let’s listen in on the conversation that took place at that meal just like Sarah did.



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."



It was an ordinary meal, sharing bread with strangers, extending hospitality and kindness. And yet, in being faithful, Abraham and Sarah received a blessing that changed their lives forever—the promised son.

Having children was something for which they had stopped hoping. The news that Sarah would have a son was met with laughter. Little did they know that the guests they had entertained spoke with God’s voice and power. **Is anything too wonderful for God?**

How many times have you failed to recognize God’s presence in your life? This story is behind that wonderful verse in Hebrews, **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”** Hebrews 13:2

Do you recognize when God visits? Have you missed a blessing God wants to give because you have neglected the stranger among you? Part of what I am doing in the Huddle Group I lead is training the people to recognize divine appointments; to recognize People of Peace—people God has placed in our lives.

It is clear that showing hospitality is one of the core teachings of the Bible. In Deuteronomy 10:19 there is the injunction, **“You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”**

Loving and welcoming the stranger is one of the core teachings of Jesus. “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Matt. 25:35,40

Like Abraham and Sarah, when we share our bread with the stranger in need, we are giving directly to God.

In one of his Christmas sermons, Martin Luther was preaching to his congregation about the poor hospitality shown to Joseph and Mary by the people of Bethlehem. He said, “There are many of you who think to yourselves: ‘If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby!’... You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem, because...Why don’t you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor.”

People here at Vista Church are good at welcoming the stranger in our midst, because almost all of us are from someplace else! We know personally what it feels like to be a stranger; so I believe we are more sensitive to the needs of the stranger.

But I must recognize that on a national level “welcoming the stranger” is a big issue. Now I am not going to start an argument here about legal verses illegal immigration. I follow enough of those arguments on Facebook. But we must recognize the elephant in the room and that many people struggle on many sides of this issue. My plea is that we love and pray for one another despite our differences and in particular pray for our leaders.

I also want to let you know that I have seen and worked with people from opposite sides of the issue and politics to save lives. At CCUM there is a ministry to help political refugees get legal status and citizenship in the United States. It is run by a die-hard Republican and a die-hard Democratic. Outside the issue of saving refugee’s lives they have lively arguments about the policies and the politics of the day; but

both agree that their Christian faith calls them to this ministry, a ministry of welcome and hospitality. I encouraged them when they were first starting this ministry. They have saved over 200 lives.

Because of the stance of the Republican they will not help anyone in the country illegally. I wish it was as simple as that; but the very first woman they helped was in this country because she over stayed her tourist visa. Her dad was an official in the political party that was out of favor in her African country. She got a call from him one day and he told her not to come home to stay in America. She then didn't hear anything from her parents for a long time. They never answered their phone.

She finally called a neighbor. The neighbor also said not to come home. Her parents had been murdered by the political party in power and they were buried in the backyard.

She eventually was granted political asylum.

And then there was Mandy. Mandy grew up at FUMC of Mesa. Juan attended for many years. They met in the youth group I ran. They fell in love and got married. Theirs' was the biggest Italian/Mexican wedding I ever did. They went on a honeymoon in Mexico City and a week later Mandy came home by herself.

When the honeymoon was over, and in this case it was really over, they tried to board a plane back to the USA. They wouldn't let Juan board. You see Juan found out, very much to his surprise, he wasn't an American Citizen.

His mom had always told him that he had been born in Nogales Arizona, but it was actually Nogales Mexico. His new father-in-law hired an immigration attorney and the advice given was to take a bus back to the border of the USA and sneak across. That was how his honeymoon ended crossing the border on foot. About 6 months later he received citizenship after going through the hoops.

These issues are not easy. Pray for our leaders and pray for each other and let nothing divide us.

Now the person who taught me the most about hospitality to the homeless was a little black lady who ran the homeless shelter for men in Mesa Arizona. She was a fierce little lady that I tried on several occasions to recruit as a member of our church, but she declined.

Here is why I wanted her. One night I took our youth group to the homeless shelter to “feed the homeless.” She bristled up at that and said to us all, “**You feed animals. You serve the homeless.**” She demanded we treat these men with the respect that all the children of our heavenly Father should have.

She then asked us after we finished serving them the meal to sit and talk with them and give them the hospitality and dignity they deserved. We need more people like her in the church.

And so today, Jesus invites us to share our bread with one another in this sacred meal. The amazing thing is that instead of being the hosts here today, we as Vista Church, are actually the guests. And that in sharing bread with each other, Christ the true host, is present to bring blessing into our lives.

We are all strangers who have been invited and called by the Holy Spirit to be here today. We, each other, are the divine appointment God has in store for us today.

And so remember this is not our table. It is Christ’s table and we are about to be served the family meal, the bread of life—Jesus Christ.

So come, the table is set and ready. The table is open to all who would come.

In Jesus’ name amen.