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Lesson: Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:8

¹The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ²He 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. ³He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵Let 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.” ⁶And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” ⁷Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸Then 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.

⁹They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” ¹⁰Then 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. ¹¹Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” ¹³The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” ¹⁵But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”

It was the summer of 2002, and I was spending it on a bicycle riding across the country with a team of other college-aged men. The trek was the highlight of my college experience, and it was a great way to see the country and meet people all across it. One of the most memorable encounters

with others during that summer was on the 4th of July. We were in Lincoln, Nebraska, and the team had a day off from cycling. People were slowly beginning to gather in a large field to enjoy that evening's fireworks. I was with a teammate walking through this field, on our way to a restaurant to find a bite to eat, and we passed by what we thought was a large family gathering. They were not speaking English, and they were preparing foods with seasonings that I had never smelled before. As we were passing, I caught eyes with one of the men, and I smiled with a nod and simply said "hello." The man gave a big smile back, and then with rudimentary English he insisted that we sit down on a picnic blanket and eat with them.

My teammate and I were puzzled that we – two random people passing by – would be invited to join them. Yet, we had nothing else to do, and why not have a unique experience within a unique summer? So we joined their gathering, and we came to learn that they were separate families, but they were all Kurds who originally lived in northern Iraq. They had all come to America as refugees, and they were celebrating their first 4th of July here. I'm not sure how customary this is, but they had me and my teammate sit on one picnic blanket with the other men, the women had their own blanket, and the kids had theirs. The meal was a chicken dish, flatbread, and various vegetable dishes. I have a photo of the experience, and it is a part of the slideshow that you can see on the TVs in the Narthex today. What I remember the most about the experience was how hospitable these Kurdish families were to us.

Since that day, I've come to learn that hospitality is not only a defining trait of the Kurdish culture, but many Middle Eastern cultures whose roots are in the experience of being nomadic people. You see, when traveling that region by foot, it isn't always clear where the next drink of water or the next meal will be found. So going back several millennia and continuing to this day, the custom is that you show hospitality and care to any visitors who come your way, because if you are ever the one traveling, you are going to rely on others to show hospitality and care as well.

That is what defines Abram and Sarai in our first lesson today. Three unknown travelers come by their tent, and Abram and Sarai – now called Abraham and Sarah – go above and beyond to show these visitors care and hospitality. Unknown to them, these travelers had divine origins.

Seemingly, Abraham and Sarah passed the test by showing hospitality, so the travelers inform them that the two of them will have offspring.

We need to call a timeout at this point and recall how the story has progressed so far. Last week we read in Genesis 12 how Abram heard God say that he'd be the father of a great nation. In that first message, it wasn't said who the mother would be, but Abram likely assumed it would be Sarai. The first thing that happened after last week's lesson is that Abram's household traveled to Egypt. Genesis tells us that Abram is afraid to introduce Sarai as his wife, because she is beautiful, and the people may kill Abram in order to abduct her. So Abram earns an audience with Pharaoh, and Abram says Sarai is his sister. Pharaoh was overwhelmed by Sarai's beauty and she "was taken into Pharaoh's house." In due time, Pharaoh received a number of personal plagues because of this act, and when he finds out Sarai is actually Abram's wife, he sends them both on their way so that he will no longer be cursed by these plagues.

Note a few things here. First of all, the detail that Pharaoh is taken with Sarai's extraordinary beauty brings to question how old this elderly woman actually was. Often people's ages were exaggerated in these stories that were originally passed down orally, so we have to read those details with a grain of salt. The second thing to point out is that Abram's decision threatened God's promise that Abram would be the father of a great nation. By letting Pharaoh have Sarai, the prospect of that promise was threatened. Abram isn't punished for this, though; Pharaoh is. Later we find Sarai questioning how the promise will work. She believes Abram will be the father of this great nation, but she wonders if maybe the mother is supposed to be Sarai's slave girl, Hagar. The outcome of that was a son by Hagar who was named Ishmael. In chapter 17, Abraham learns the mother of the promised nation is indeed supposed to be Sarah. That news causes Abraham to laugh, but he isn't scolded for his laughter. Today's lesson in chapter 18 makes clear to Sarah that she is supposed to be the one through whom this nation will come to be. She laughs, but she is scolded for it.

We should ponder together what these two have gone through so far in the story. While doing that, we should remember that stories like these were told through the lens of how the storytellers viewed the world. Just because their point of view is expressed in the Bible doesn't mean

we today have to share their point of view. The Bible itself encourages us to apply our own wisdom to its stories, because it tells us that applying wisdom to these stories is the faithful thing to do, and doing so is doing our part to pass along the faith to those who come after us. So what about this story should we wrestle with? For starters, long ago it was assumed that if a couple was experiencing infertility, it was always the fault of the woman. And of course that was their answer because of that magically persistent force called misogyny. Misogyny is also why Abraham is not faulted for handing over Sarah to Pharaoh, and why Abraham was never scolded for his laughter even though Sarah was. Another issue is how the story treats the experience of infertility. As it is presented in Genesis – as well as with Elizabeth in Luke’s gospel – infertility is less of a real problem that actual people face, and it is more of a theological conundrum to be overcome. According to these accounts, all that is needed is for God to miraculously “open” the woman’s womb and the whole thing is resolved.

The truth is that there have been countless people who have experienced the pain of infertility. Even today with our medical treatments, there are untold numbers of people who still silently bear this pain. Even if everything lines up nicely, patients of fertility doctors are told that their odds for a successful pregnancy after treatment are usually less than 50%. So many, many people go through those steps, and in the end they only have the crippling medical bills to show for it. That was the experience that Ginger and I had. We walked that path for years. After taking a few months to regroup from our fertility treatments, we started the adoption process. But before anything would result from that process, we received some surprising news from an at-home pregnancy test. Then a few weeks later an ultrasound revealed some doubly surprising news. The outcome is different for everyone, and I always want to recognize that. I also want to acknowledge that sometimes after giving birth, people discover they are no longer able to get pregnant again. Their pain is real, too.

As the church, we don’t need to dig into people’s business and question people about their potential of having children. If raising such questions – even among your own family – is something you are prone to do, then cut it out. Often these questions inflict pain that you aren’t even aware of. At the same time the church tends to either say the same harmful things or it avoids the whole conversation by being silent on a matter that is the source of so much pain for so many people. Yet

people in this struggle need to hear the church say a word of good news. Hence, today's sermon hopes to break that silence, and maybe there are people here today or somewhere out there who will benefit from this message, whether their struggle is current or it occurred years ago. Even though what I'm about to say is a different perspective of God from that expressed by the Genesis storyteller, this is what our faith today teaches: the struggle of infertility is a suffering that is seen and known by God. God is with those who experience this pain, not working against them. If you hear people say that you need to pray more and then you'll get pregnant, or that "you'll get pregnant after you stop trying so hard," or you need to do XYZ and ultimately "God will bless you" with a child, please know that I as a pastor empathize with you and your pain when such words are spoken. As best as you can, I hope you will disregard those comments that serve to diminish your experience and that make your walk with God into some sort of transactional relationship. I don't know what will result from your experience, but God knows your struggle and I know that God is with you no matter what.

Our gospel passage today says that Jesus looked at the crowds of people and he had compassion for them. So he gave them care, and then he proclaimed the good news that God's reign was near them. He then commissions to proclaim that same news and do the work that he does. Often I will hear of Christians who take the proclamation part to heart, but they fail to embody the compassion part. A message of God's nearby reign and care is not very convincing if the messenger doesn't first bear compassion for others like Jesus does. I can barely recall anything that was discussed on that picnic blanket in Lincoln, NE, but when those families began our relationship with displays of hospitality and care, it forever shaped me. We should learn from that. We should lead with hospitality, with care, and with compassion for other people's pains – be it infertility or any other struggle – because that is exactly what Jesus does.

Amen.