

“The Laughter of Sarah”

Genesis 18:1-15; Romans 5:1-8

I begin where Pastor Bill stopped his sermon last week about the Call of Abraham. I begin where three mysterious visitors show up on the doorstep of Abraham and Sarah at the Oak of Mamre where they live.

I certainly do not want to repeat Pastor Bill’s history lesson about Abraham and Sarah. I do want to give you a little geography lesson. If you are one of those visual learners, I do not have a map to display on the screen today, however, if you were to go and sit down in any of the upstairs bathrooms, you would find one there!

Bruce Feiler has written a number of books that I have brought with me today about traveling the biblical places of the Holy Land that are sometimes hard to get to due to political situations. In his volume, “Where God Was Born”, he provides this geography lesson that I want to share:

When Abraham came, it was the age of empires. The world was divided into big powers: Egypt, the biggest to the south, then the Mesopotamians to the north. It was a bipolar world, and the land in the middle was weak. Canaan wasn’t even a state; it was city-states. (There you have it...)

At the start of the thirteenth century BCE the world began to change. Twelve hundred BCE was a landmark in history...

First, Egypt and the reigning Mesopotamians, the Hittites, clashed in Syria, coming to a virtual draw. Soon after, the empires began to decline, leaving a vacuum in Canaan. This social breakdown opened the door to new powers from the West, namely the Mycenaean, the Greek-speaking empire that built Thebes and Troy and provided the backdrop for the Iliad and the Odyssey. Also, a mysterious population called the Sea Peoples began a full assault on the coastal plain.

Scholars disagree about whether these Viking-like bands were from the Aegean, Anatolia, or some combination, but the result is the same: a new western front in the struggle for Canaan.

This land where Abraham come to is not that big. Its not that fertile. If you’re in Egypt, it’s the only way to get to Syria. If you’re in Mesopotamia,

it's the only way to get to Africa. If you're in the Mediterranean, it's the only way to get to Asia. It may not be the living room, but it's a corridor, and a very important corridor at that. Israel, the world's greatest hallway.

It is geographically still the world's greatest hallway today at the intersection of three continents with the Great Rift Valley running through it, approximately 7,000 kilometres (4,300 mi) in total length, that runs from Lebanon in Asia to Mozambique in Southeast Africa.

The Age of Empires has passed. Everything is in flux or chaos. It is here where God presents himself/herself to the elderly couple a second time in the form of a **theophany**. There are three visitors, or angels who come.

What is a theophany? It basically means an appearance of God. Theophanies don't always mean God appears in the form of a human. God can sometimes manifest in fire or a tempest. A theophany also tends to serve a purpose. Theophanies can often have elements of prophecy or revelation, serve as a guide (the pillar of cloud and fire), or a turning point (Jacob's wrestling), or some combination thereof. (...there will be more on this later)

This is a turning point for Sarah as she is invited to join in with Abraham and is called to be a parent of a great nation even though she is 90 years old.

This is a turning point as the mysterious strangers who drop in for dinner serve as a guide to Abraham and Sarah.

Remember this—God brings order out of chaos, the chaos of 13th century BCE, the chaos of nations, kings, and principalities, and even small city-states. God further guides and speaks into what is an impossible, and yes, inconceivable situation (pun intended) where eventually this old couple become the parents of a great nation! With God, nothing is impossible!

These parents of a great nation, prophets of three different worldwide monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. How does this happen? Romans says that:

By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise. (*The Message*, Romans 5:1-2)

Greatness comes by faith in God. Abraham and Sarah became the progenitors of a great nation and three worldwide faiths by their own devotion and faith.

Yes, they wavered. Yes, they tried to manipulate God’s promise with Hagar and the birth of Ishmael. Yes, both Abraham and Sarah laughed in the face of God upon hearing God’s promise to them. And yes, Abraham even lied to an Egyptian pharaoh about Sarah not being his beautiful wife. He was far from perfect. These were tough, chaotic, and violent times. And yet, there are some actions that are happening in this event in Genesis 18 that are small that lead to great sea changes.

Hospitality is one such action. Abraham and Sarah extend hospitality to their three visitors, perhaps not realizing at first that they are entertaining angels, and yes by extension, even God.

Hospitality is the relationship between a guest and a host, wherein the host receives the guest with some amount of goodwill, including the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers. Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt describes hospitality in the *Encyclopédie* as **the virtue of a great soul that cares for the whole universe through the ties of humanity.**

I like that. **Hospitality is a virtue of a Great Soul. God, the Greatest, shows divine hospitality by taking care of all of us through our ties to humanity...**

The Hospitality of Abraham icon we see now on the screen is often called “*The Trinity*”. Abraham shows the virtue of his great soul by taking care of his guests. When we show hospitality we are mirroring Abraham and Sarah, and even God!

This icon, which depicts three angels visiting the Prophet Abraham at the Oak of Mamre, as described in the Book of Genesis, is regarded as one of the greatest visual representations of Trinitarian unity, and had been kept at a Russian Orthodox monastery until it was taken by the Soviet state.

It is strange irony that the Russian President Vladimir Putin last month has ordered the handover of Russia's most famous icon and work of art, Andrei Rublev's 15th-century Trinity. The move is widely seen as a gesture of thanks for the Russian Patriarch vocal support of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and as a sign of superstitious beliefs among Russia's elites that the icon can bring battlefield victory.

Honesty is another small action that can lead to great sea changes... If the Bible is anything, it is honest, of not offering a gentle phrase, but a blunt one. The writer of Genesis 18 tells us "the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah" (v. 11). Menopause now stands in the way of Sarah conceiving, and what the Lord pledges is impossible for men to accomplish. Sarah's quiet laughter (v. 12) is not entirely surprising, since all she could see at the time was the cruel fact that she was long past motherhood.

"The Laughter of Sarah" does not have to be derisive or dishonoring. If Sarah truly had no hope to give birth to a son in her old age upon hearing God's promise, then she would have cried or wailed or even cursed God instead. In order to laugh, there must be hope, even a sliver of hope...

God brings order out of chaos for Abraham and Sarah. God brings laughter on separate occasions out of both Abraham and Sarah, a sign of hope and faith. God wants our honesty and does not punish us for our doubt and wavering.

What honesty, what chaos do we need to offer to the Great Soul of the Universe today. What laughter in the face of disappointment can we offer as evidence of our hope and faith?

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