

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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Genesis 18: 1-15

Holly was disturbed, bewildered, and stressed out. Our neighbors informed us that they were selling their house and most of their possessions. They would use the equity to buy a giant motor home, travel the country, see the national parks, all while home-schooling four kids, accompanied by a dog and two cats. Holly's blood pressure spiked. She started thinking about how to manage laundry and food, and school work as if it isn't hard enough as it is. She thought they must have lost their minds and considered doing an intervention. I was a little more sympathetic. My brother, after all, lives out of a Sprinter van. I have enjoyed my fishing trips and camping my way around the mountains of the West. I have never done so, however, with a whole entourage of everything we own. I was horrified, on the other hand, at the idea of eating up the equity they had in their home in one fell swoop.

We are settled people in many respects. We are familiar with the rhythms and comforts of living in one place, having the security of walls and the comforts of possessions, and increasing equity and security. We have sewer systems, water supply, and food distribution systems that bring resources to our homes so we can live in one place year-round. Abraham and Sarah, on the other hand, are used to a level of semi-nomadic life. Lacking water lines and trucking routes that bring food from places that farm throughout the winter, they moved about as seasons and resources dictate.

As my professor used to emphasize, settled living brings different perceptions, assumptions, and orientations than semi-nomadic living. For example, if you have land with cordoned-off boundaries and possessions to protect and a stranger shows up at your door or in your garage, your first question might be whether this stranger is a threat to you or your property, and questions pop up as to why they are there. Whereas, if you are traveling and have limited resources and are constantly relying on others for help and directions and little blessings along the way and a stranger walks up to your tent, you might perk up seeing that person as someone who may have news or resources or that they may be a potential friend.

If you are a settled person, you may likely thank God for stability and for possessions, for rhythms and everything rolling along smoothly. If you are a semi-nomadic person, you are more likely to thank God for the help you needed that day

to get where you needed to go, to thank God for daily provision, for new friends along the way, and for little joys and blessings that were unexpected.

The semi-nomadic aspects of biblical society contributed to the significance and sacredness of hospitality. Hospitality is how you make friends and find the help and resources you need. It is how you get the news, to know what is over the horizon in the direction these visitors just came.

Now traveling is not the same as semi-nomadic living, but it can counterbalance our settled thinking. We take on a different posture, travel light, hope to encounter and learn new things. O'Donoghue's poem is just such a reminder or an instruction to us settled and stationary folks of what blessings and discoveries traveling can bring, in particular, the people and the interactions and relationships, as well as the self-discovery possible, of the sense of expectation and openness that might serve us well.

I preface all this because as we find Abraham and Sarah, they are living semi-nomadically, camped at the Oaks of Mamre, and they are hosting men who are both travelers and strangers in their tent. As these men approach, we see Abraham act out of cultural protocol. He offers hospitality to three guests who approach his tent. He sees them all of a sudden. He comes to them, shows honor and deference, and insists that they rest in the shade of his tent flap, that he should wash their feet and offer them food.

Abraham doesn't know who these three men are, nor does he need to. This is the stuff of tent hospitality. He doesn't know who they are, though the fact that he offers them meat and kills a calf for them suggests these are more than average guests. Perhaps a hint from the narrator, an embellished detail in the retelling to say that Abraham, our great patriarch, did not merely offer the Lord bread when the Lord came to his tent.

But Abraham and Sarah do not realize at the time that these men are some kind of divine emissaries. How could they? It was a day like any other. It was a routine occurrence; guests needing refreshment. When do they realize, I wonder? When does the story go from "these men" said to us, to "the Lord said?" Perhaps the realization comes when these guests bless the host and his house, and it goes beyond routine when they predict Sarah will bear a son. Perhaps when they say they are not just passing through but indicate that they will return in due season, as if they know where Abraham's tent will be pitched. Perhaps when they challenge Sarah's laugh. Or maybe it comes a little later, when Sarah recognizes she is with child. Maybe it is then that they look back and they realize that these were not just

men passing through but messengers of the Lord, three men whose words they come to understand as words of the Lord.

As people who move about, they expect the Lord to show up unexpectedly, often providing the relief or help one needs. The accounts throughout the Bible give various accounts of this. Sometimes it is in a cloud, or a burning bush, other times simply in providing water or fulfilling a promise. In a voice, or through a prophet, sometimes in a still, small whisper uttered quietly under the cover of the wind. But what all these examples have in common, is that these are ways that semi-nomadic people might expect to experience the Lord – the Lord showing up a bit unexpectedly with help and blessings and a word of insight or foresight.

And since, in the semi-nomadic experience, God often shows up a bit unexpectedly with help or blessings or through a stranger's help, it highlights Sarah's reaction. Now she is on the other side of the tent flap doing the preparation and perhaps forgets how thin a piece of fabric is, but her reaction risks offending their guests rather than truly being open to one's guests, able to receive their news and blessings. Sara laughs. But this is not a jovial laugh. It is a scoff. Scoffing at their news. Scoffing at such possibility.

In fairness to Sarah, she has walked a path of disappointment and shame, unable to bear children. At her age, she has likely seen her body change and go beyond the point of that even being a possibility. She has grieved and had to let go of that hope, and to accept the stigmas that go with it. So, it is not unreasonable that she might not be able to accept this word with joy and expectation. But at the same time, it shows that she has lost a sense of expectation and possibility. She has lost the sense that the stranger at her tent flap has anything to offer, that God might still show up somehow.

And what happens when we stop believing such things? What happens when our anticipation turns to cynicism? What if, like Sarah, we think the stranger has nothing to offer us? That there is nothing sacred in that encounter, that the Lord doesn't show up to help anymore?

Many of Jesus' invitations or commands require a willingness to move, to travel light, to adapt and to expect that God will meet us in the place we are going, or to meet us through those that will take us in. I think of when Jesus sends out his disciples the first time, he tells them to travel light, to not take an extra cloak, and to rely on hospitality. When Jesus tells his followers to sell their possessions and come follow, it is not a call to run around naked and starving, it is a call to live

reliant on the kindness and community of others. It is a call to walk by faith, to discover what we need along the way.

The cultural context in which Jesus speaks is quite different from ours, and we struggle to appropriate his call to faith and to travel light and to discover God in the provision along the way. And it is harder to forge community with others, because we are all walled off from each other in our homes, pulling into the garage and closing the door, reducing the chances of even bumping into a neighbor. It makes the work of reaching out to a community and to neighbors all the more challenging.

Now I have emphasized our settled mentality and tendencies. But there are aspects of hospitality and semi-nomadism that we know as well. Our family was in Seattle last week, bouncing between a few friends and enjoying their kind hospitality. We know what it is like to need the help and kindness of others. We know what it is like to find God in an unexpected encounter or moment of provision. We know what it is like to move and find God in a new place, or to experience the Lord when we step out in faith.

I think of the image on our cover, the likeness of a pilgrim, leaning forward in anticipation and expectation that the journey has something for him, there is some needed encounter at the destination, some needed revelation, some needed spiritual growth. The one who chooses to move physically so that some similar movement may happen spiritually, emotionally, and mentally.

There is a certain nimble-ness required in our lives and our spiritual journeys. Jesus bids us to come; we cannot know his grace and forgiveness unless we come. Jesus bids us to go to others, but if we don't think we have anything to learn, if we think we have nothing to offer, or that God is not in that encounter, we will be unmotivated to do so.

There is a nimble-ness required because unless we hear the call to go, we will let the person next to us be someone else's responsibility, we will not risk a stranger becoming a friend, will not risk what is possible, will not share their pain, and their joy. We will be like the disciples who say to Jesus, "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place." But Jesus said to them, "You give them something to eat." You offer resources and hospitality.

Like Sarah, our sense of expectation and possibility has weakened, and our reaction may be to scoff. But perhaps God can remind us too that God is still at

work, God is still present in the world around us, can still be encountered in a stranger, still meet us when we step out in faith. Maybe by paying attention to our travels, we can discover that nimbleness and possibility again, when we leave our comforts and familiar rhythms.

Grant us eyes to see you, O Lord, and renew in us a sense of expectation and hope, so that we might follow you in faith and bless those we encounter.

And all God's people said...

*A Son Promised to Abraham and Sarah*  
(Heb 13:2)

**18** 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. <sup>4</sup> Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. <sup>5</sup> 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.” <sup>6</sup> And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” <sup>7</sup> Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. <sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.”

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. <sup>12</sup> So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” <sup>13</sup> The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’

<sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”