



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 6A, JUNE 14, 2020
GENESIS 1:1-15; PSALM 116:1, 10-17; ROMANS 5:1-8; MATTHEW 9:35-10:23

HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN GOD IS SPEAKING TO US?

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7) *[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. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."*

How do we know when God is speaking to us?

I wonder how Abraham knew, sitting by the mighty oaks of Mamre in the heat of the

afternoon, when the sun's blistering power forced suspension of one's daily work for a time, to seek refuge and rest in the shadowy silence with nothing more than one's own thoughts. A rhythmic practice of midday

quiet, born of functional origins that might just let the scales fall from one's eyes and see beyond the blind spots and glimpse the divine approach.

We are told that God appeared to Abraham there; but Abraham just sees three men standing near him. They just appeared, and somehow Abraham knows he is being treated to a holy experience...beneath the oaks of Mamre.

Trees have long held particular meaning and purpose for Christians. Ethiopian Christians have for 1500 years gathered for worship in the forest, under a stand of trees, where, tradition holds, the canopy of leaves holds their prayers close, preventing them to float away into the sky. Prayers held close that God might come close, too.ⁱ

Or African slaves in the Americas during the 1800s practiced their forbidden faith by slipping into the woods to gathering places known as brush arbors, also called hush harbors.^{ii iii} Here they were free to hear a word of hope, sing their spirituals, and make their pleas to God who would utter promises of redemption and release.

In Rwandan villages after the genocide a quarter century ago, truth and reconciliation hearings would take place beneath a tree

whose roots had been soaked with the blood of victims, while its leaves held their tearful memories in breezy whispers.

Even this cathedral's imposing pillars and lofty ceiling have been likened to tree trunks and a canopy of grace and beauty meant to draw the eyes up into a hallowed moment.

And yet...how do we know when God is speaking to us?

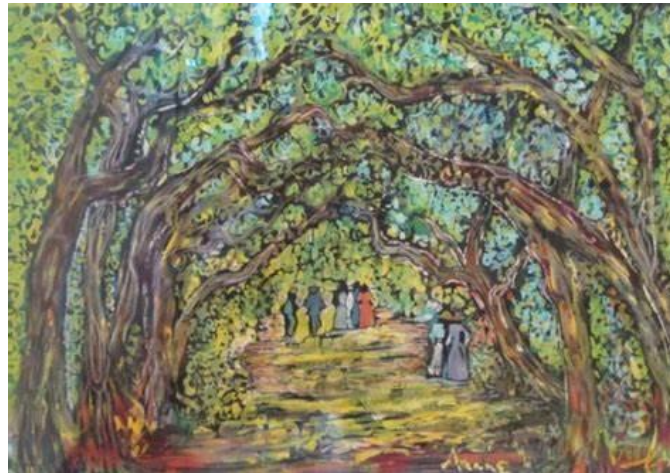
Abraham somehow knows and beckons his guests to sit and rest for a while. A feast is envisioned—bread from choice flour, a fattened calf, milk and cheese curds. Travelers would have normally been greeted and served simple fare before moving on when the sun's tilt meant a cooler journey. But it would have been unusual for such grand preparations to be made, except that Abraham somehow

knows...knows that God is speaking to him.

“Where is your wife Sarah?” one of the guests asks. How did he know her name? “She’s there in the tent.” And then the surprise comes: within the year she will conceive

and bear a son. The stranger says it matter-of-factly, and loudly enough for both Abraham and Sarah to hear it.

Three chapters earlier, Abraham brandishes his unbelief at the divine promise, but here he just takes it in. It is Sarah turn to laugh, her feet squarely on mortal ground, her disbelief



stirred into the kneaded dough, her cynical scoff at the prospect that her post-menopausal womb and her husband's ancient loins would conjugate into such a scandalous and unbelievable production.

How do we know when God is speaking to us?

Or perhaps the first question we might try to answer is why do we read these stories? Why not pass them off as just prehistoric myths? I mean, let's face it, there's a lot in these stories that stop us short, right?

Well, our old friend Walter Brueggemann suggests at least three reasons we keep reading them, and wrestling them, and chewing on them for a morsel of truth in our own lives:

1. They are inexhaustibly interesting.
2. It is the Church's vocation to wrestle with them as we discern God's purpose for us here and now.
3. Our current situation is vexing to us, and these stories help us make sense of the world we live in today.^{iv}

It's worth noting that God comes in the form of human flesh here, and the gleaning for us as people of faith, it seems to me, is that what we discover time and again in the scriptures, and in our lives, is that God shows up precisely in the pendulous swing of human existence between hurt and hope.

Can we discover God in the midst of both the hurt and the hope of our time?

Trappist monk David Stendl Rast suggests that hope is openness to surprise—that the more open we are to surprise, the more hope we will have in our lives.^v

And so we must ask ourselves, Is anything too wonderful for God?

If we say yes, that some things are not possible for God, then what we claim as God is in fact not God, but an idol which exists to confirm our constrained unbelief. Cynicism and despair are often companions for that idol when they show up unannounced at our tent's door, shackled by the limits of our imagination.

And thus limited, they will never surprise us.

But if we say that nothing is too wonderful for God, then we have unleashed the divine energy in our lives, we have invited the divine energy into our tents, into our lives, beneath our trees of spiritual wonder, to feast upon that presence, to be surprised again and again by the promises that flow from the lips of a loving God.

This does not mean that everything we may desire is possible—only that which is promised to us by this God who engages our hurt and our hope at every turn. Only that is liberating and life-giving to us and others.

For Abraham and Sarah, the divine promise was the blessing of progeny in their old age,

so that the covenantal blessing might survive beyond their generation, even unto our own generation here and now. We know that God blessed them so that they would be a blessing to all the families of the earth, and gave them a fervent hope as boundless as the stars of heaven.

How will we know when God is speaking to us?

Our scriptures have all sorts of surprising stories that might provide clues—God’s word comes in a still small voice, in the sheer silence on the wind, in the earthquake and storm and transfiguring mountaintop moment, in the prophet’s rant against injustice, in the insistent voice for change, in the chant of the faithful gathered in hush harbors and desert wilderness and city streets, and beneath the oak tree, common as it is.

Perhaps God waits for us to sufficiently settled ourselves to the possibility, and then appears in our midst to deliver the promise of hope and charge of a holy vocation, as people

of God, as children of Abraham and Sarah, to be blessed so that we may be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

But let us be clear: we’ve not always done that with a full measure of grace. We’ve failed terribly in many ways if we are honest.

But then along comes this remarkable moment when a pandemic, and economic devastation, and racial violence have honed our spiritual senses to be ready for a visitation, a new ordering, a reorientation. Maybe, just maybe, in this remarkable moment we can hear the voice of God speaking to us a fresh new word. The pendulous swing of human existence between pain and hope, with birth pangs stirring deep in the womb of what may yet be for us, for this nation, and the world.

Is it too wonderful to consider that God may be in the mix? And how will we respond?

ⁱ <https://africageographic.com/stories/ethiopias-church-forests-2/>, accessed June 10, 2020

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hush_harbor, accessed June 10, 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ohio.edu/infocus/hushharbors/>, accessed June 10, 2020

^{iv} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJo_67FYldg, viewed June 9, 2020

^v <https://thevalueofsparrows.wordpress.com/2017/12/04/prayer-hope-openness-for-surprise-part-one-by-brother-david-steindl-rast/>, accessed June 10, 2020