

SERVING OUR EXTRAORDINARY GOD  
Genesis 18: 1-15; Matthew 9: 35 - 10: 8  
Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time • June 14, 2020  
by Pat Berger

Remember back in the good old days, like two or three months or so ago, when we got the family together to celebrate birthdays, or Mother's Day or (very soon!) Father's Day? There would be lots of cleaning and shopping and cooking as we prepared for the big event. And we would even hug people as they arrived! Well, our story from Genesis for today reminded me of that, even though it wasn't really a big celebration. It was a Big Deal.

God, we are told, appeared to Abraham as he sat by the oaks of Mamre. I must digress for a moment; the commentator wrote that it was important for us to know that "oaks" is a mistranslation of the Hebrew. The word actually means terebinth; Abraham, then, was sitting by the terebinths, which were low-growing shrubs with red leaves and berries. So: Abraham was sitting by the terebinths of Mamre; he looked up, and three men were standing there. He ran to greet them -- also important for us to note: men did not run in that time; they wore robes, which might have got tangled in their legs and they might have fallen, which would not have been dignified. It is clear, then, that Abraham recognized that these men were important, and he was going to be the perfect, welcoming host -- hospitality was major in that culture at that time. He bowed to them, offered to wash their feet and to bring some refreshments. Abraham went back to his tent; he told Sarah to start making cakes; he ran (again) to the herd, picked out a calf, gave it to the servant to be prepared. (Clearly, "refreshments" here didn't mean ice water and a bunch of grapes. . .) Then -- several hours later, we would think -- he gave them the cakes and meat and some curds and milk, and stood there and watched while they ate. Hospitality, indeed.

Then we get to the really fun part of the story, the part where God does extraordinary things. The guests asked where Sarah was; Abraham told them she was in the tent; and one said, "I'll be back again, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah was not a young woman, any more than Abraham was a young man; Sarah laughed: "I will have a child?!" Apparently, Abraham hadn't told her that he had had a similar conversation with God in the previous chapter. One of the visitors (now we read that it was God) noticed that she had laughed (we are not surprised), and the visitor said to Abraham, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (which is the part we need to remember, for our lives, right now), and said to Abraham, "I will return to you," and "Sarah will have a son." Ordinary people to whom an extraordinary thing -- that is, God -- was happening and would happen.

Indeed, is anything too wonderful for the LORD? Is anything so extraordinary that we could imagine that God couldn't do it? No. At times like we find ourselves in

right now -- pandemic, demonstrations and more -- which might be called extraordinary themselves, this is what we need to remember: there is nothing that our God cannot do.

And then there is God's extraordinary Son, whom we also have the privilege of serving. When we look at today's verses from Matthew, we see Jesus preparing the disciples to go out to do his work -- again, we note, ordinary people were being prepared to do extraordinary things. This time, however, no one was laughing. Jesus, we are told, was going about teaching and proclaiming, curing and having compassion. He saw people who were stressed and seemed helpless, and he couldn't be in enough places at one time. And so, he gathered his disciples, twelve ordinary people, and gave them authority to cast out unclean spirits and to cure every disease. These ordinary people ranged from Peter, who would deny him three times, to Judas, who would betray him, and yet: all were sent out to do Kingdom work.

Jesus gave them specific instruction; they didn't need to make up the task on their own. They weren't to go among the Gentiles, or the Samaritans, Jesus told them; rather, they were to go to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel". They were to proclaim the Good News: "The Kingdom of Heaven has come near," Jesus told them to say. And they were to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons -- no wonder they weren't laughing. And: they had received the gift of this assignment without payment, and they were to do their works without payment.

The next verses tell about difficulties that Jesus knew his disciples would encounter as they went about this work; this was not an easy task for which they had been chosen. And, he told them, they needed not worry about what to say, for it would be given to them at that time; it would be, Jesus said, "the Spirit of God speaking through you." One commentator wrote that, "The instructions on how to be a disciple in mission would, with the backing of our Risen Lord, become instructions on how to make disciples in mission."

And in our days, now, days of a disease that is understood differently hour by hour, and of civil unrest like we have not seen for many years, and fear that is used to divide and to manipulate, what does our extraordinary God need from those of us who are today's extraordinary disciples? No one person can answer that for any other, and we know for sure that each of us needs to respond. We are the ones who are the disciples, the ones who go out to proclaim Good News. We may not be called to cure sick ones or to raise those who have died or to cleanse lepers or cast out demons -- or maybe we are. We are, certainly, those who have been called to be and to make disciples in our time, the ones to tell God's Good News. And, like those first disciples, we don't need to worry about what to say -- the Spirit of God will be speaking through us.

We know that God loves each and every one of the beloved children, accompanies each one every day, and that nothing is beyond God's extraordinary capacity to act. The important part, for us, is the showing up, doing our part. We hear of demonstrations that end horrifically, and we hear of demonstrations where people act like people, maintaining order while they carry their signs and shout out. I heard that there was one of the orderly type of demonstration in St. Helens, a demonstration that went very well. There was a story on the news the other night of a little girl who is making bracelets and selling them, giving the money to a group that provides food for those who are in need, and to that point she had raised over \$36,000! The food bank where I help out typically provides food to about 9,000 people each month in northeast Portland; since March, they have been giving food to about 12,000 people each month, and donations have increased to allow them to keep up with that. I am sure that your Columbia County Food Bank could tell a similar story. And there are many such stories of those who help, thanks be to God.

This sermon will be recorded before the Session meeting, so I can't tell you what the Session determined to do with the \$1000 check that has come to the church from the Presbytery to be used to help those in need in this area because of the COVID-19 virus; I am sure that many of you will know the decision before the next sermon! (And if you haven't heard, we can make sure that you do!) A part of the gift is that the Presbytery wants to hear stories and see pictures of what people do with the gift. If they don't hear by the end of July, the money has to be returned. I can hardly wait to hear the creative ways that I know these dollars will be used! One of the churches in the Presbytery has already let it be known that they turned their check into gift cards and gave them to the children in the church to hand out to people who were in need -- I want to hear a follow-up story on that one!

There are plenty of settings where we have the privilege of living out our calling, every day. Especially at this time, we cannot afford to think that someone else will take care of our part. Each of us has been called. How will we respond? Abraham was silent. Sarah laughed. Jesus' disciples went to work. AND: we know that our extraordinary God is in charge and remains faithful, and walks beside us every day, encouraging our response. Let's get moving!

Let us pray.