

CHALLENGES AND ENCOURAGEMENT
Third Sunday in Pentecost • June 18, 2023
Genesis 18: 1-15; Matthew 9: 35-10: 23
by Pat Berger

Is anything too difficult for God? Well, no, we think; God can do everything. And then something difficult happens to us or to someone we know, and we think: where is God in this? How is it that this had to happen?

This is one of the situations in which we find Abraham in our reading today. He is out sitting in front of his tent, we are told, and he looks up and three visitors have appeared -- apparently, three divine visitors, and somehow Abraham knew this. Abraham gets up from his chair, and bows to the ground in front of them, and offers them water to drink, water for washing their feet, and space to rest under the trees. He runs into the tent and tells Sarah to make cakes for the visitors. Then he runs into the field where his herd was.

The running part is important: at that time, in that society, men did not run. Think: if you were wearing a long robe, and you ran, the robe would tangle in your legs -- what would happen? You would fall. And that would not be dignified. So: you don't run, but Abraham did; these visitors were important! He ran to the field, took a young calf and gave it to a servant to prepare.

Now, I know nothing about cows or preparing them, so I called my sister-in-law who grew up on the same dairy farm that my husband did. She didn't remember a lot, but enough. She said that it would take at least an hour to get the calf ready for roasting, and then another half hour to roast small pieces. This is not "somebody dropped in and you offered them some strawberries and a cup of water;" these were important people, and Abraham knew this, and was treating them appropriately. The men sat and chatted, they asked after Sarah, and then: the Big Question: where is your wife Sarah? There, in the tent. And one said, "I'll be back, and Sarah will have a child." Sarah laughed to herself, we are told. This was not a young couple.

Abraham was at least 90, and Sarah was in the same age range. When we think of challenges, this would have been one for them; men were supposed to father children, women were supposed to have children, that hadn't happened and they were no longer young -- and NOW they would have a child? Sure. The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? I will return, and Sarah will have a son." Sarah said, "I did not laugh." The holy man said, "You will have a child. And you did laugh." And it happened as he said. He returned; Sarah had a child. Talk about encouragement: God's encouragement. And, the baby was named Isaac, which means, "laugh."

Our Gospel reading for today has its share of challenges and encouragement also. Jesus is sending the disciples out into the countryside. What they are to take with them, and all they are to take with them, is: the authority Jesus has given them to cast out unclean spirits and the authority to cure every disease and sickness and the authority to proclaim the good news. They aren't to take money with them, he said, or a bag with extra clothing. They are to expect hospitality from those in the towns they visit, as "the laborers deserve their food." If the house or the town is not hospitable, they are to shake its dust off their feet as they leave, and things will be very sad for that house or town. And the disciples weren't to worry about what they were to say; Holy Spirit would speak through them.

It seems to me as if it would, indeed, have been challenging for the disciples to need to depend on others -- in this case, on God -- for their welfare and especially for their words. Perhaps you have been in a situation where someone said to you, oh, don't worry, you will know what to say when the time comes. Those have never been reassuring words for me! And then imagine them, as they go, and Holy Spirit, indeed, has appropriate words come from their mouths! After it happened once, and then happened again, and again -- talk about encouragement! And then imagine the talk around the campfire after a day of doing that ministry!

It is still challenging for us, today. We aren't often sent out empty-handed to speak words that God would give us to say, or to heal with authority given by Jesus. But there are tasks that need our arms and our legs and ears and mouths in order that those tasks be accomplished for the kingdom. And how are we at receiving those tasks?

How hospitable are we when God comes calling? The challenge of God's kingdom for us would seem to be that we be welcoming when God comes calling: not an easy assignment. But the encouragement also comes calling, when we allow room for it. Holy Spirit will see to it that we do the right thing and that we say the right thing. We simply need to do the welcoming part. And, Jesus said, the one who endures to the end will be saved. Our lives are fitting us for the tasks God needs to have us do. Let's be about the business of being ready and welcoming every time that God comes calling.

Let us pray.