

## *Welcoming God's Promise*

Genesis 18: 1-15      Luke 10: 38-42

I'm sure you've noticed anytime you've tried to organize an event, whether it's a big rally on the downtown square or just having a couple of friends over for dinner, there are an amazing number of details that you have to pay attention to. The details will be different based on the kind of event, but even a relatively intimate, low keyed gathering gets you scrambling to assemble all the pieces that will make things happen the way you want.

In the hubbub of details and activity, you can find your attention divided, maybe even to the extent that you completely forget what you're really supposed to be doing. My mother loved to entertain folks, but she was lousy with the details, and being a prolific talker, she could easily be engaged in a wonderful conversation, not wanting to miss a word anyone had to say, and completely forget that the dinner was burning in the oven. It was quite common to have her plan on dinner at 6:30 or 7:00, but we wouldn't be eating until 8:30 or 9:00, with many prayers said that the food would be edible by the time we sat down. Invariably something came out either burned or half-cooked because the timing of things got thrown off by some conversation from which she couldn't tear herself away.

I think I've told the story of the first time we had a school fair at Stanton Weirsdale Elementary School, and somehow I managed to be in charge of the whole thing. Being the first time out, I was literally losing my mind between vendors, supplies, games, attractions, staffing, food, lines, registrations, trash removal, safety, and a thousand other items. I'd hate to know what my blood pressure was. Thankfully I was 15 years younger.

Everyone who had a need, an issue, a concern, or any question ended up coming to me for an answer. While I'm answering a question, I'm simultaneously looking around to see what else needs my attention. Different people and some groups had volunteered to take on certain responsibilities. The Boy Scouts were in charge of parking cars, and at that time, the troop included my son. Keeping cars away from the centers of activity was a key necessity since there were all kinds of kids running amok, the last thing you wanted was some tragic accident.

I see a couple of cars driving around the scouts and heading toward the main area. I freak out. I mean I literally went ballistic. I went running out toward the scouts bellowing like a wounded moose, "No! No! No! No cars should be coming in here! What are you doing!" And I'm carrying on like a lunatic. In fact, there was some good reason that the cars were let through, but my son was totally mortified; "No, that's some crazy guy I don't know." I had lost my mind entirely in trying to cope with all the details, and fully lost perspective that it was a community of people coming together, volunteering and giving their time and energy in support of our local community school. I had just made a complete idiot of myself as I hollered in abject rage at these Boy Scouts who were really doing a very good job.

In our first story from Genesis 18, old Abraham and old Sarah are out in the middle of deserted nowhere (Fairfield?) where they don't see many folks passing by. Yet, "in the heat of the day," a vision comes to Abraham of three visitors to their tent encampment. He didn't apparently see them coming. Maybe he was dozing off, a little siesta, but suddenly they were there.

Abraham rushes out to meet and greet them. His welcome does the whole hospitality thing. 'Please stop with us on your journey. We'll get some water to wash your feet. Enjoy the shade of these oak trees while we make you up some bread.' It's too good of an offer to pass up.

Notice the wording, how Abraham gets other people, servants mostly, to do the work of hospitality while he engages the guests in friendly banter about the weather, the crops, the herds, the wife and the ... well ... the wife and ... the servants, travel conditions, all that good stuff.

Abraham hangs out with his guests while they chow down. They're all near enough to the tent so that Sarah can hear their conversation quite clearly. It's in this conversation that the remarkable statement is made by these mysterious visitors that they will be returning, and when they do, Sarah will bear a son for Abraham.

That would be wonderful, except it's preposterous. They're really old. Sarah in particular is well past the time of life when an egg is ever going to appear for fertilization again. Those days are long gone.

This had been Abraham's bitter complaint before God. God kept insisting that Abraham would have a son through Sarah. So many years had passed that the promise seemed broken. Sarah had even insisted that Abraham have a son with her Egyptian servant Hagar which produced Ishmael. Still, God persisted in the promise, but Abraham laughed at the idea in the preceding chapter – laughed out loud at God (17:17).

Having laughed that time, Abraham isn't laughing now. Having had his candid conversation with God about this, it sounds to Abraham like God may finally mean business, however nutty the whole thing seems.

Sarah presumably was unaware of God's recent reiteration of this fantastic promise to Abraham. From behind the tent, she hears this promise. We can imagine the silence from Abraham and the guests as the host, mouth agape, lets this promise being made sink in.

Then from behind the tent, breaking the silence, comes the snorting sound of stifled laughter from Sarah. This whole promise of a son, of a pregnancy, is simply too much for her. Right: it's got to be a joke. We'd have a really hard time holding it together if we'd overheard this.

The story illustrates how unexpected and bizarrely unpredictable God's promise can be. This promise of a son comes after decades of this promise repeated time and again. The couple is resigned to what has (not) happened over this time. They've closed the door on that promise, allowing that God has richly blessed them in so many other ways. Why persist? Let it go and move on. Yet God persisted in presenting the promise.

With the promise set aside, their lives and their expectations conformed to a comfortable pattern with an attitude of acceptance. This is the way it's going to be; no son will ever be born to them.

Was their model faithfulness unshaken? Well, they never lost their strength of belief, their determination to obedience, or their gratitude for many gracious blessings. Yet, their faith in the promise of God, **this** promise of God had ceased, surrendered to reality as so many well-intended promises end up. It isn't set aside in bitterness, but in resigned acceptance that it simply would not happen.

With the strange visitation, the promise is invoked anew and in specific terms and times. *Is anything too hard for the Lord?* It's a statement that challenges the expectations of those who claim to be faithful, but who, quite innocently and realistically, have lost faith in the Lord's ability to make amazing things happen.

We have all been there and done that. It's happened forever; it's nothing new. There is no condemnation for having set oneself apart from the expectation that God would fulfill a particular promise. Rather than a condemnation and judgment, this story is really a reminder that God is God, God is Sovereign, and God will do things that far exceed our imagination. It's a dope slap upside the head that the promise of God goes far beyond whatever we might possibly imagine, blowing away whatever we might conceive. Indeed, conceiving new life in a womb that had no business welcoming new life ends up being a great place to do it.

Ask Mary of Galilee what it's like to have the promise of God overwhelm your wildest imagining. Wild ride!

Our story in Luke deals with adult Jesus. It's a brief one that also showcases hospitality for a strange visitor and concerns the exceptional promise of God.

At the home of Martha and Mary, we find very different sisters. We can, even in this brief description, give them profiles. Martha is the eldest, right? Opening the door and greeting Jesus, Martha has already assumed the role of hostess, the one who runs the household, and is chief steward of hospitality. She quickly sizes up the situation and, in typical Middle Eastern custom, is concerned about properly honoring the prominent guest in their home. A list of things to do has instantly formed in her mind.

As she closes the door, her feet move toward the refrigerator, hoping she has more than a Stouffer's macaroni tray. "Is any of that good wine left, or did the family drink it all for Uncle Moe's birthday? Maybe Jesus would rather have iced tea or lemonade. Dessert? I tossed all the good stuff for that diet. Maybe there's some Jello

pudding mix I can whip up fast. For thirteen? My heavens, the good china hasn't been out in six months, probably layered with dust.' You get the idea. Martha has her hands full. Her mind is in overdrive.

Mary on the other hand is clearly the younger one. She's used to having her sister take charge and it's best to simply stay out of her way. Martha knows what to do, and why should a back-up person venture into the front line at a time like this. Mary has a role that she knows how to play: being attentive to the guests, taking care of immediate needs, perhaps simply keeping them company while Martha does her thing. Mary ushers in the disciples, finding them seats, asking if they need anything, and assuring them that she and Martha are not the least burdened by their sudden arrival. The disciples begin to talk with Jesus, and Jesus takes the opportunity with everyone seated together to illustrate another facet of the Kingdom of God and his mission. Mary is quite taken with the teaching and pulls up a cushion, giving him her full attention.

Meanwhile, Martha is buzzing around the kitchen in a scramble. She has no choice but a box of potato flakes, but she needs more water from the well. Where's Mary when you need her? She's sitting on her keester, of course, doing nothing to help. Flustered Martha interrupts Jesus: *Lord, if you **really care**, tell her to help me!* The whole room is silent and every face is scowling at her.

Jesus' reply hammers every over-functioning eldest child. *Martha, Martha, Martha, you're all fussed. Not everything is equally important. In fact, only one thing is needed. Mary chose the better role and I won't change that.*

Now you have to wonder if Jesus thinks that a nice dinner simply appears with no effort. Surely Jesus would like to eat, and see his company taken care of. Surely Jesus doesn't expect Martha to break custom, courtesy, and respect, and **fail** to provide for her guests. Remember how Jesus chastised the Pharisee for his uninspired hospitality.

Martha wanted to take Mary away from hearing the promise of new life in Jesus. That defeated the whole idea of coming to their home, that the promise would be shared and received by them. True, it may not be possible for both to hear it at the same time, and yet have hospitality matters taken care of. But at least one of them would be blessed by the promise.

Martha got overtaken by the realities that the situation had produced. In that way, she is like Abraham and Sarah for whom the realities of their situation diverted them from the promise of God.

These stories remind us of the priority of the promise of God above all other promises, as well as the importance of positioning ourselves to welcome God's promise however and whenever it comes. The promise of God can totally exceed our wildest imaginings and make possible what never even entered our minds.

Hospitality also means welcoming God's promise – that unexpected reminder that God is awesome and beyond our understanding.