

Presumptions, Possibilities, and Promises

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

CWZepp, BWCOB, June 18, 2017

I am exceedingly glad to standing here before you today. The last time I stood in the front of this sanctuary, exactly two weeks ago, Jeff and I were leading you all (11:00) through a blessing and sending for all of our children, youth, and younger adults who would be heading out for the various faith formation experiences we support each summer. A few days later, those leaving for the first two of those trips crawled into the church van and departed from our parking lot in before dawn on Thursday morning. Four were dropped off at the airport for their flight to their California workcamp. The other five of us continued on to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for the first stops on our Heritage Tour at Germantown and the Wissahickon Creek before National Jr. High Conference. Our final stop of the day was to be an overnight with the Nornhold family. But a little after 5 pm, when we were about 15 minutes from their house, I failed to see a stop sign on an unfamiliar road until it was too late to stop. Unfortunately, another vehicle was coming into the intersection at just that moment on our right, did not have a stop sign, and crashed into our van. Fortunately, everyone involved walked away from the accident a bit shaken up, but with only minor injuries. With a little help from our friends and family, we were able to maintain our itinerary, participate fully in the conference, and a week ago today, we were sitting in the Dunkard church at Antietam Battlefield, which is featured on today's bulletin cover, on the final stop of our Heritage Tour.

Now some of you may be hearing about this accident for the first time right now. But I know that after hearing about the accident last week, many of you have been wondering what happened, how everyone is doing, etc. So I wanted to begin today by saying a few public words about what happened. But I also want to thank you for the thoughts and prayers that surrounded us before, during, and after the incident. Once the dust had settled a bit last Thursday – everyone having been checked out by the first responders, the van (which I will be very surprised if we ever see again) having been towed away and the police reports having been completed – the five of us had a few minutes to ourselves while we waited in a field for Rich Nornhold to come and give most of us a ride. And I reminded the group about the prayers that you all had pledged to surround us with the Sunday before we left.

Now I must confess that when I speak now about the accident, I am a bit conflicted about how to characterize my feelings. It was a pretty bad accident, but it could have been much, much worse. Were the prayers for safety and traveling mercies to be credited for our escaping with such little injury to our persons? Were we blessed and smiled upon by God? Or were we just lucky? These are profound theological questions for which I honestly do not have a good answer. I know that I am hesitant to claim the first two, because of the implications that we enjoy divine favor while those who are not so fortunate in accidents do not. Case in point – right now, I have a friend whose seven-year old son is still in the hospital after he endured traumatic and life-threatening injuries from a school bus accident over a month ago in Lancaster County, PA, not that far from where we had our accident. And it does not seem right to suggest that that little guy and the other 15 persons who were injured in that crash did not enjoy God's blessing, but we did.

And yet I am grateful. And despite my existential wrestling with the whys and what-nots of the accident, I can say unequivocally that I felt the divine embrace in the moments during and hours immediately following the accident. Regardless of whether we were blessed or just lucky, we were definitely not alone. And for that, I am certainly humbled and grateful.

Now, I am not going to spend my whole time talking about the accident. But before we leave the topic, I do want to share one more piece of the story before we move on – and it's a piece that will actually lead us into our scripture for today. After the crash, it seemed like almost immediately there was a host of people that showed up to check on those involved, begin cleaning up the debris from the roadway, and direct traffic around the intersection. I remember vaguely wondering how so many people were on the scene so quickly, since it happened in a pretty rural area.

A good bit later, after things had somewhat settled down, I was talking with the police officer who had taken the lead, when a man appeared beside me. "Can I do anything to help you all?" he wanted to know. He introduced himself as Derek, the owner of the house at the corner of the intersection. As we were standing in the middle of a field at that time, he offered that we could come up to his home. We declined, since we were expecting Rich to arrive anytime to give most of the group a ride. Pressing a bit further, he asked if we would all be able to fit in his car. When I said no, he'd only be able to take 4 of us at most, he offered a ride to whoever didn't fit, gave me his cell number to call when our ride came, and went back to his house.

A few minutes later, after Katie, the girls, and all of our stuff had been loaded into Rich's car and they were driving away, I turned around to see Derek making his way down the hillside from his home. He was not going to take no for an answer! So I went with him back up to his house, where he gave me a glass of water, said goodbye to his family, and showed me to his car. On the ride to the Nornholds, I learned that Derek had just left his 26-hour old newborn at home with his wife. Most of the people who had so quickly appeared to help at the scene of the accident were his family, who had come over to see and welcome the new baby home just a little bit before our accident.

To say I was touched is an understatement. Here was this man, who was surely still exhausted and excited from the birth of his baby, who dropped everything to help a stranger in need. And I know that he had extended similar hospitality to the other driver, who had gone to their family's porch to gather herself after the accident. And as I thought about Derek hurrying down his hillside to make sure I was going to take him up on his offer for a ride, I saw Abraham hurrying out from the entrance of his tent at the Oaks of Mamre to offer hospitality to the strangers who had come his way. And the streams of faith that have taught generations the mandate of hospitality for neighbors and strangers alike converged upon a battered and weary traveler far from home. And I gave thanks for a gift for which I had not asked, and a stranger who inserted himself into my story to lend a helping and hospitable hand.

When I was first percolating on this text and choosing my theme for worship, I was fixated on the presumptions that we all so often make about strangers. Most of us have been taught from an early age to be suspicious and wary of strangers, a mindset that most of us carry subconsciously into adulthood. We may not presume ill of strangers consciously, but we are also not generally ready to open our homes and lives to them either. Why is that, really? That was the question that was rolling around in my mind early as I considered this story.

Basic to that question is my association of story of Abraham and Sarah with the verse in Hebrews 13:2 that says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” My chosen title was based on the formulation of a question that asked “Do our presumptions about strangers preclude possibilities of seeing God’s promises fulfilled?”

I am still enthralled by this question. In fact, I found a wonderful reference to a rabbinical midrash on this text that brought the question into even sharper focus. In this particular midrash¹, when Abraham runs off to find the prime calf to slaughter and cook for his three guests, he has a hard time catching it. The calf leads him on a merry chase, until it enters a cave Abraham never knew was there. Following the calf inside, he discovers something remarkable: two graves. And not just any graves: these are the graves of Adam and Eve. Abraham experiences a mystical vision then, in which the cave becomes filled with light. The light forms itself into a great and mighty river, a river of light which flows out from that place to enlighten all the world. And this is when Abraham chooses this very cave for his own burial site. It is the cave of Machpelah, which is mentioned in Genesis 23 and 25 as the burial place of both Sarah and Abraham.

One of the key points of this midrash, of course, is that by going all out to make sure his guests experienced the very best of his hospitality, Abraham found himself at the conjunction of God’s creation and promises for all the world. The possibility that Abraham and Sarah could have missed out on the fulfillment of these promises in their lives by neglecting to extend hospitality to these strangers is compelling in and of itself.

But the past two weeks have flipped the script a bit for me. Rather than contemplating the biblical mandate to extend hospitality to strangers, I have found myself immersed in gratitude and humility as the recipient of hospitality when I was the stranger. And the main thing I am feeling and thinking about now when I contemplate this text is how to pay it forward.

The more I have thought about it, the more I have come to the conclusion that this posture is not far removed from the heart of the biblical message. While this story of Abraham and Sarah is a foundational one for the Israelites, the biblical command to extend hospitality to strangers is actually rooted most firmly for the Hebrews in the story of the Exodus. Typical is Deuteronomy 10:19 – “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” At its most basic, it is a command rooted in the Golden Rule – extending to strangers the same hospitality that you would like (or would have liked) to receive when you are a stranger yourself.

And so in the end, that is my sole message for us today. I cannot presume to know whether or when God’s providence and promises will come into play in any given situation. But I have recently been a stranger on the receiving end of gracious, God-inspired hospitality. And from this side of the exchange, it felt like the embrace of God and the convergence of generations of life and faith in a moment. And I can only hope that when the time comes, I will be as ready, willing, and able to pay it forward, and as open as Abraham and Sarah to the possibility that in so doing, God’s presence and promises will come to light. May it be so...

¹ *Homiletics*. Vol. 29, No. 3. May-June 2017. p. 61.