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AT HOME WITH GOD

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I don't want the title of today's sermon to throw anyone off. By "At Home with God," I do not mean the happily-ever-after that we expect up in heaven. Rather, I mean that we are at home with God right here on earth. Perhaps a closer idea is that God is in our home. God is a part of our ordinary day-to-day affairs. God has a place in our homes, not just on a shelf with a dusty Bible, but in our vital daily affairs.

Some people think that they can live in love with the world down here and expect to have a love for God up in heaven. Let me assure you that if you have no love for God down here, you won't find it easy to live in heaven. If you don't enjoy singing God's praises now or doing His work now, how are you going to enjoy it for eternity?

But even closer to home is the idea that home is a place where our true loyalties and temperament are tested. When I was in high school, a group of young actors performed a humorous skit in which a mom, dad, and two children were on their way to church. Everyone argued and yelled the whole time, and the father kept honking at the car ahead to try to make the driver speed up. To their horror, that car pulled into the church parking lot just ahead of their own! The father made a quick save by noting a bumper sticker that said, "Honk if you love Jesus!" And of course the whole family was smiling and polite as they entered the church, whereas not a minute before they had been fighting and fuming.

You see, we may be presented with some truth, some great movement of God, while we are at church; but most of the time our faith is tested in the places where we are most comfortable and not really thinking about God. We might control our tempers at church, but fight and curse and argue at home. We might act nice around church people, but be mean-spirited, condescending, and bullying in our homes or workplace. Our words may be sweet at church but nasty everywhere else when we aren't on guard. In other words, God is constantly presenting us with opportunities to show us who we really are and what we're really like underneath all the pretensions. That is exactly what we find in Genesis 18. Let's look at the first few verses together, shall we?

1 And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day;

2 And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door; and bowed himself toward the ground,

3 And said, My LORD, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant:

4 Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree:

5 And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said.

Here again the Bible shows its authenticity in the attention to detail of Eastern customs. This is a true picture of the customary procedure of greeting and hosting strangers. The picture is that it's a hot, sunny day, and Abraham is sitting in the shade his tent offers, when he sees three men walking along. He doesn't wait for the men to come ask for refreshment and shelter from the brutal heat; he is a gracious host, willing to run to meet them. Keep in mind that it was considered undignified for a man to run in most circumstances! Abraham runs to meet them, and then bows before them.

A question arises, though: we, the readers, are told up front that this is the Lord; but did Abraham know that? I don't think he did. I believe he truly entertained angels unaware, as the writer of Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 13:2: "*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*"

Abraham greets the men by bowing and calling the chief among them "my lord." This word "lord," which is *adonai* in Hebrew, is sometimes used in reference to God, but is also used of men. In the common usage, it would be something like "sir" to me or to you. Again, this is all very typical of the customs of that day and time, as is Abraham's offer of rest and refreshment. In fact, some of you may be holding a version in which the word "lord" is not capitalized.

What is apparent to me is that Abraham is eager to please his guests. Some of us might have thought, "What? Visitors? Sigh...I guess I'll have to take care of them. What a bother!" Abraham doesn't feel that way at all. He sees himself as the means of refreshing the weary along the way. You see, Abraham is ready to do good. He looks for opportunities to do good. When someone shows up in his area with a need, he responds enthusiastically to meet that need. That is a clear sign that his heart is circumcised, as we discussed last week. His heart, mind, soul and body are ready to serve God whenever and however.

Doesn't that remind you of what Jesus said? In Matthew 25, Jesus tells of the King of Heaven talking to His servants:

34 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

35 For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

36 Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

37 Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink?

38 When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee?

39 Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

40 And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

The King visits us unawares. The King visits us in the humble form of our neighbors, our brothers, or even complete strangers who have some need or needs. To the extent that we meet those needs, we are unwittingly serving our King.

Now, if you knew the King were coming to visit, you'd make some special preparations, wouldn't you? Of course you would! You would put out your finest food and place settings. You would spare no pains to see to His every comfort. The problem is that we don't know when the King is coming, and when He comes, He doesn't look like a king at all! This is the test of our devotion: *to act always as though we are in the very presence of the King.*

This is exactly what Abraham does. Notice his hurried activity. Notice the quality of his provision of food.

6 And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth.

7 And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it.

8 And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat.

Do you see Abraham “hastening” and “running”? Do you notice that he sends no servant on these errands, but takes them upon himself? Do you see Sarah making the bread with her own two hands? Do you see Abraham selecting a calf “tender and good”? Do you see Abraham standing by the visitors as a servant, ready to meet their needs? I think we can see the background material for Jesus' teaching in this example of Abraham. Abraham was eager to put his very best before those who had a need; he passed the test.

Ray Stedman puts it this way:

His tests catch us unprepared, off-guard. It is when we are confronted with some simple situation that no one will know about that the tests of life really come: When you are relaxing at home and the phone rings and suddenly you are confronted with a call for help, or a demand for a response—and you had planned to relax and enjoy yourself all afternoon—what happens then? That's the test.

When you are busy around the house with your hands immersed in dishwater and something is burning on the stove and the refrigerator has just quit and the sink is stopped up and you've got sixteen different problems on your mind, and your child comes up and asks you a question which is obviously of little importance, what do you do then? That's the test.

When your neighbor or friend gets sick and somebody has to take care of the children—what do you do? What is your reaction? These are the tests of God. This is the way God tested Abraham.¹

As the meal ends, the visitor reveals both His identity and His purpose.

9 And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent.

10 And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him.

¹ Ray Stedman, “When God Comes to Dinner.” 1969. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/genesis/when-god-comes-to-dinner>

With this question, the Lord reveals His identity to Abraham: “Where is Sarah?” Who else could know Abraham’s wife by name? This is no mere stranger!

We find parallels in the New Testament in which people did not recognize Jesus until He said or did something specific to open their eyes. To the disciples on the road to Emmaus, His identity was hidden until He broke bread with them. To the disciples in the upper room, even His plain statements did not satisfy them until He ate in their presence (Luke 22:13-43). In the passage we have today, it is the asking after Sarah which reveals beyond doubt the identity of the Visitor.

God also repeats a promise, but for the first time gives certain specific details: God promises that Sarah will bear the promised child at an appointed time. Most scholars understand that phrase “at the appointed time” to mean “at this time next year.” The time appointed has come for the promise to be fulfilled. God always knew when that time would be; but Abraham and Sarah did not. God had put the appointed time beyond human hope to prove that He can do what no one else can do. Now Abraham knows that Sarah will bear the promised child, and she will bear him in about a year’s time.

But not everyone is satisfied with the news. Sarah has overheard the announcement, and her reaction follows.

11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

12 Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?

13 And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?

14 Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.

15 Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.

The reason for Sarah’s mockery is made plain in the passage: she knows that both she and Abraham are long past the age of child bearing. There’s no way this can happen, not by any stretch of the human imagination. She has long since given up on the life-long dream of having a child. It seems to her as if *she* is the one being mocked, not the other way around. God, however, is not mocking. He’s not giving her “pie in the sky” or building up a false hope.

He speaks to Abraham about Sarah’s laughter. Sarah thought no one knew she was there. She thought her laughter was purely internal; but God knows the heart and He speaks to the heart. In the language of the heart, He speaks to Abraham and to Sarah: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

That is the question for us today as well: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” Jesus said, “With men, this is impossible; but with God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

The wonderful thing about this story is that we get a better glimpse of Sarah’s heart in the New Testament:

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised (Hebrews 11:11).

Isn't that wonderful? When she heard God promise the impossible, she laughed; but when she thought about it, when she reflected on the Promise Giver, she believed. Sarah's faith was not strong, and that weakness caused her to laugh; but her faith was in the Almighty God, whose strength can never be measured. You see, it's not our faith but the *object* of our faith that matters most. Sarah realized that God is faithful, and that made all the difference.

So then we find two lessons today: first, we need to be ready to serve the Lord with our bodies, our time, our talents, by ministering to those in need at unexpected times. Second, we need to put our faith in the God for whom nothing is impossible. Our faith may be weak, but the object of our faith, God Himself, is impossibly strong:

. . . and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith (I John 5:4b).