

“Open to the Impossible”

“I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

In my childhood home, Entenmann’s was more than merely a brand of baked goods my mother bought at the Acme; it was a symbol of our readiness to welcome unexpected guests. Our families had an open-door policy, which meant that at any moment a car might pull into the driveway with a member of the family who had decided to stop in for a visit. There were never any phone calls (and other means of communication like text messages hadn’t been invented) because there was an unwritten rule that we were always welcome in each other’s homes at any time. The Entenmann’s cake stood ready to be put on the table with a pot of coffee as a sign of our willingness to be open to unexpected guests at any time.

While Entenmann’s cakes are still sold in the New York Metropolitan Area, sadly the hospitality and openness to unexpected guests that they symbolized has largely disappeared. Where once an unexpected knock on the door was met with excitement, today we usually react with suspicion about who might be on the other side of the door. For many people, it would be unthinkable to drop by the home of a friend or family member without checking in first with a text message or phone call. As a pastor, the days when I could drop by the home of a parishioner has also mostly disappeared; I have learned that calling first is an expectation in these days when – often for good reasons – we need to be suspicious about who has arrived unexpectedly at the threshold of our homes.

In today’s first lesson, three unexpected guests arrive at the entrance to the tent where Abraham and Sarah have set up their household “*by the oaks of Mamre.*” (Genesis 18:1). It is a reminder that the ancestors of the people of Israel were nomadic before they received the Lord’s promise of a land to call home; a central part of Israel’s ritual remembrance of its history recalls that “*a wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.*” (Deuteronomy 26:5). In nomadic culture, it was not unusual for unexpected guests to appear at the entrance of one’s encampment, and the host was obliged to not only welcome this stranger into the family’s tent but to provide food, water, and shelter, which in the harsh desert environment of the Middle East as a matter of life and death.

- “As a result, strict codes of conduct developed to govern such encounters. These conventions of hospitality also applied equally to the desert dwellers who lived in tents as they followed the grazing herds (today called Bedouins). They were obligated to provide for travelers that stopped at their tents, and under these customs could expect some protection from hostile actions from the ‘stranger.’” – Dennis Bratcher, “Travelers and Strangers: ‘Hospitality’ in the Biblical World.”

These cultural expectations help us understand Abraham’s response when he sees three strangers standing at the entrance of his tent. Without hesitation, Abraham follows the accepted rules of hospitality: seeing, running to meet, honoring, inviting, refreshing, preparing, and serving. When he “*bowled down to the ground*” (18:2), Abraham is honoring his guests with a gesture that was appropriate for all visitors, not merely for important people. Abraham and Sarah give of the best they have: they make and serve food to their guests, remain available to them, and are concerned for their welfare. They understand themselves to be the servants of the travelers who have honored their home by their presence:

- “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.” – 18:3-5.

In their endeavors in meeting their obligations as hosts to their unexpected guests, neither Abraham nor Sarah recognize that it is *“the LORD [who] appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre”* (18:1), nor do they recognize that it is the Lord who is speaking to them with the promise that *“I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”* (18:10). The Lord’s promise echoes the promise Abraham had received that *“I will bless [Sarah], and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come to her.”* (17:16). The promise that the Lord makes to Abraham reinforces the covenant promise in which God chose Abraham and made with him the covenant promises through which he would become the ancestor of God’s people:

- “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” – Genesis 12:1-3.
- “[The LORD brought Abram] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” – Genesis 15:5-6.

There is, of course, one major obstacle that has been standing in the way of the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah from the start: they were unable to have children, and were not at the age when giving birth to a child was biologically impossible: *“Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.”* (18:11). So it is understandable that her reaction to the message their guests announce would be skeptical laughter; after all, she asks herself, *“after I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”* (18:12). Sarah’s laughter echoes the laughter of her husband when he heard the Lord’s promise of an impossible child: *“Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’”* (17:17).

- “This is not the laughter of faith, it is the laughter of unbelief, the laughter of the skeptic. Skepticism looks only at the facts. She and Abraham are old. Period. He is ninety-nine and she is eighty-nine. It has been years since she stopped menstruating... That was too much for Sarah. She laughed. The laugh of unbelief is a sad, cynical laugh.” *Word & World*.

As they still do not recognize the Lord’s presence in their midst, Abraham and Sarah are startled – and probably embarrassed – when their guests react to Sarah’s laughter, remembering that Abraham had also responded to God’s promise with the laughter of skepticism and doubt:

- “The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a child.’” – 18:13-14.

God’s question moves Abraham and Sarah beyond their limited view of the future to a consideration of God’s possibilities, in which nothing is too “wonderful” (*pale*), which can also be translated “hard, difficult.” The related plural noun commonly refers to God’s wonderful deeds of redemption and judgment:

- “So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my *wonders* that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go.” – Exodus 3:20.

- “I therefore make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform *marvels*, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the LORD; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.” – Exodus 34:10.

In her fear and embarrassment, Sarah tries to deny that she laughed; but the LORD responds by reminder that *“oh yes, you did laugh”* (18:15); but this should not be seen as a word of judgment upon Sarah nor as an act that will negate the fulfillment of God’s promise, because her cynical laughter will soon be transformed into the laughter of faith. This happens in the second part of our First Lesson, when *“the LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.”* (21:1-2). The birth of this son brings a key element of the story of Abraham and Sarah to a climax, stressing that God has made good on God’s promises and that Abraham had been obedient in the naming and circumcising of this child:

- “... your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him ... my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” – 17:19, 21.

The name Isaac means “laughter,” and in her response to the birth of this impossible child Sarah rejoices in how the Lord has turned her cynical laughter into the laughter of faith: *“God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me ... Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”* (21:6-7). She invites everyone to join with her in the laughter that rejoices in the God for whom nothing is too wonderful or impossible.

- “Indeed, at the center of Israel’s imaginative enterprise are Yahweh’s ‘impossibilities’ (*pela*), which regularly transform, reverse, and invert lived reality, either to the delight or the dismay of the other participants in the narrative ... [In Genesis 21:1-7] the promise is kept; circumstance is overcome by the reliability of Yahweh. Impossibility is enacted, and the promise made in 12:1-3 and 15:1-6 is kept intact.” – Walter Brueggemann.

When Abraham and Sarah opened the doors of their home to their unexpected guests, they were also opening their lives to the unexpected grace of God for whom nothing is impossible. Such acts of hospitality in welcoming others into our lives along with the unexpected blessings they may bring to us is also an important teaching for Christians in the New Testament. Luke’s Gospel begins with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a couple who are strikingly similar to Abraham and Sarah in that they are also an elderly couple who *“had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.”* (Luke 1:7). But they would also receive the blessing of God’s grace that overcome all impossibilities when the angel proclaims that *“your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.”* (1:13). We then meet a young woman named Mary of Nazareth, who also receives an angelic visitor with the message that *“you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus ... for nothing will be impossible with God.”* (1:31, 37). When Mary opens the doors of her heart to the blessings of God for whom nothing is impossible, she opens herself and all who have faith in her son to the *“peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [which] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* (Philippians 4:7). The child born to Mary who opened her life to God’s impossible grace will call upon his followers to extend the same hospitality to others that made the blessings of their ancestors Abraham and Sarah possible; for *“just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”* (Matthew 25:40). The teaching of extending hospitality to others carries on throughout the New Testament, including hospitality that welcome fellow Christians as we have been welcomed into the fellowship of faith by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ:

- “Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the

very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.” – 1 Peter 4:8-11.

Paul instructs leaders of the church to be *“hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled”* (Titus 1:8), for those who are not hospitable to others show that they are also not hospitable to welcoming God into their lives: *“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”* (1 John 4:20). As Abraham and Sarah were unaware that in welcoming the three unexpected guests they were welcoming the Lord into their home and their lives, God’s people must not *“neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”* (Hebrews 13:2). Christian hospitality is not only extended toward humans but is also extended toward God.

- *“Hospitality toward God is not simply a spiritual matter, but a response of the whole self in the midst of the quite mundane affairs of everyday life. Although we are not always able to identify the presence of God in the midst of life, God assumes flesh and blood in the neighbor.”* – Terence E. Fretheim.

As stewards of God’s holy church, we are called to extend hospitality in welcoming all persons into our assembly where all of us are guests in God’s house. The church is neither a private club nor a gathering of a select few, but is the place in which all are welcome. It is the place where all of us were once strangers, outsiders who were welcomed into God’s presence by the grace that is ours in Jesus Christ, through whom *“God proves his love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8). We are called to welcome unexpected guests into God’s house because at one time we were among those who appeared unexpectedly at this threshold: *“remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”* (Ephesians 2:12). As *“we love because God first loved us”* (1 John 4:18), we welcome others because God welcomed us and made us members of the church which is the body of Christ. As we open our doors so that *“all are welcome in this place”* (ELW Hymn 641), we open our hearts to receive the gracious, unexpected, impossible blessings of God for whom nothing is too impossible or too wonderful and who can transform the laughter of cynicism and doubt into the *“laughter of belief [that] is joyful and confident.”* (*Word & World*).

- *“The more you learn to love God, the more you learn to know and to cherish yourself. Self-knowledge and self-love are the fruit of knowing and loving God. You can see better now what is intended by the great commandment to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.’ Laying our hearts totally open to God leads to a love of ourselves that enables us to give whole-hearted love to our fellow human beings. In the seclusion of our hearts we learn to know the hidden presence of God; and with that spiritual knowledge we can lead a loving life.”* – Henri Nouwen.

As a child, I knew that there was always an Entenmann’s cake in the pantry; I also knew that it was strictly off-limits, because it was only to be eaten when company arrived. It was a symbol of our family’s hospitality that always welcomed unexpected guests and the blessings their presence would bring to us. It is a hospitality that I am hopefully extending in my life – not only as a family tradition, but as the teaching of our Lord who welcomed me as a stranger into God’s household of faith and calls upon all of us to extend hospitality as God’s people both to others and to the Lord. When we open our doors to others, we open ourselves to the blessings that their presence will bring us. When we open our hearts to the Lord, we open ourselves to blessings of God for whom nothing is impossible, nothing is too wonderful, and nothing can close us off from the fullness of God’s grace that is ours when pray, *“come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let these gifts to us be blessed.”* Amen.