

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Genesis 18:1-15
January 13, 2019

Unexpected Dinner Guests

Back in 2005 we established our church's motto Come. Be Fed. I still remember the conversations around what we wanted to be know for. We wanted to be a welcoming place...where we could share our love of food, fellowship, and spiritual learning with others. It was a little while later that we added the "Be Sent" piece to remind us that our time of food, fellowship, and spiritual learning was to equip us to go out and be part of God's work in our world.

Food is important to us.

One of our Core values is that we know, appreciate and love one another, sharing lives of faith. We find that it's around the table that we get to know one another and share our stories of faith. Monthly Pancake Breakfasts, Top of the Hill Seniors Potlucks, Orchards Young Families Potlucks, Hanging of the Greens Potluck, Maundy Thursday Soup Potluck, Church Anniversary Summer Picnic Potlucks, and Dinners for Eight Potlucks are all ways that we break bread and have communion with one another. Apparently we can't be Presbyterian without a potluck. But through these times together, we celebrate our common union in Christ and believe that something special, something spiritual happens as we do so.

Jesus Christ comes and dines with us.

This winter, Lent, and spring we will be diving more into this idea that Jesus is present with us when we break bread not only with other Christians but also with strangers, foreigners, and people who are unlike us in many ways. I'm calling this series "Feast" as a metaphor for the banquet the awaits us all in the kingdom of heaven. We experience a foretaste of this heavenly banquet as we sit down at table with one another.

In the Bible, God works in some pretty mysterious ways and we see how in the Old Testament especially God appears to people, most often through dreams but also through visitors. Visitors with whom they share meals. There is good reason why the Apostle Paul encouraged the Greek speaking Hebrews "Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. But do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have entertained angels without knowing it."¹

Today we are going to dive into one of these stories where God miraculously appears through some visitors. We call it a "Theophany." And we go way back to the book of Genesis. To set up our story, Abraham had just encountered God where he was told to circumcise every male in his household as a sign of God's

¹ Hebrews 13:1-2

covenant with God's people. It is also when God changed Abram's name to Abraham and promised him a son when he was ninety nine and his wife Sarah was ninety years old. It's a pretty amazing story, but let's listen to what happens next!

Join me as we pick up this story in Genesis 18:1-15 and we see how God appears to Abraham through some traveling strangers who happen to stop by.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This 85 year old couple, having been married almost 60 years, had died in a car crash. They had been in good health the last ten years mainly due to the wife's interest in healthy food, and exercise.

When they reached the pearly gates, St. Peter took them to their mansion which was decked out with a beautiful kitchen and master bath suite and Jacuzzi.

As they "oohed and aahed" the old man asked Peter how much all this was going to cost.

"It's free," Peter replied, "this is Heaven."

Next they went out back to survey the championship golf course that the home backed up to. They would have golfing privileges everyday and each week the course changed to a new one representing the great golf courses on earth.

The old man asked, "what are the green fees?"

Peter's reply, "This is heaven, you play for free."

Next they went to the club house and saw the lavish buffet lunch with the cuisines of the world laid out.

"How much to eat?" asked the old man.

"Don't you understand yet? This is heaven, it is free!" Peter replied with some exasperation.

"Well, where are the low fat and low cholesterol tables?" the old man asked timidly.

Peter lectured, "That's the best part...you can eat as much as you like of whatever you like and you never get fat and you never get sick. This is Heaven."

With that the old man went into a fit of anger, throwing down his hat and stomping on it, and shrieking wildly.

Peter and his wife both tried to calm him down, asking him what was wrong. The old man looked at his wife and said, "If it weren't for your blasted bran muffins, I could have been here ten years ago!"

We laugh but there will come a time when we will feast in this manor and not suffer the consequences we do on earth. In the meantime, we get to feast in moderation.

There are several things from this story about Abraham's encounter with the three strangers that I'd like to lift up today. Who are these people exactly? How does Abraham receive them? What benefit does Abraham get in return? And finally how does this speak to us with regards to our times around the table with one another?

Well let's deal with the first question. Who are these people exactly?

Throughout scripture people have encountered with the living God. We call them theophanies, quite literally "God appearances." God appears three times to Abraham. Once to his son Isaac. Once to Jacob. Twice to Moses on the top of Mt. Sinai and once in the wilderness at the burning bush. Once through visions to Micaiah in 1 Kings and to the Prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel. And once to the Apostle John through his visions of the throne of God in Revelation. I would also argue that God "appears" at Jesus' baptism and his Transfiguration in the Gospels.

In our story today, this is the third encounter that Abraham has with the living God. The scripture says that "The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day." Then Abraham looked up and saw three men who just miraculously appeared out of nowhere standing nearby. Clearly Abraham was caught off guard as he was keeping watch.

Watch for what?

His nephew Lot.

When famine had taken over the land of Canaan, Abraham and his nephew Lot escaped to Egypt. When the famine was over, they resettled in Canaan and became very prosperous herdsman. But their two herds had become so large that the land couldn't sustain both. So they separated. Lot left for Sodom because it was well watered. Abraham settled in Haran near the famous Trees of Mamre where he is in our story today. Tensions over their new found prosperity grew between the two sides and left them with ill feelings toward one another.

Has money ever gotten in the way of our family relations before? It happens. But it doesn't have to especially if we look at money simply as resources that God has given to us for a season to channel to the world around us. We don't own anything. It's all God's. But sometimes money comes to own us.

Perhaps Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent keeping watch over his flocks, minding his own business. Where else did we hear about shepherds keeping watch over the flocks by night when they have an encounter with the heavenly host and they were so afraid? The shepherds at Jesus' birth.

Like the shepherds, Abraham doesn't quite know what to make of these three unexpected guests. He ran quickly from his tent to them. Not bad commentary for a ninety nine year old dude! He bowed low to them. This is the same Hebrew

word used to fall prostrate, on one's face, before a superior in homage, like the Wisemen do before baby Jesus, or in worship of God.

Clearly something supernatural is going on here. Abraham knows that these are not just ordinary men. They are from God. They are in fact, God. This the first time in the Bible that God appears as a trinity. Three distinct persons, yet still one God. Many commentators believe that this trinity represents the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Notice also that the conversation that Abraham has with these three persons. They speak in unison with the same voice. Each time Abraham speaks, "They Answer" in return. And so it with the our Triune God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit speak with one voice. Nothing the Son says contradicts the Father. Nothing the Holy Spirit says contradicts the Son. Nothing the Father says contradicts the Holy Spirit. They always agree.

One God, Three in One.

So then how does Abraham receive them?

Pulls out the red carpet. Abraham shows them Middle Eastern Hospitality at its best. Hospitality was one the most highly regarded virtues of the ancient world. Social protocol required an actual meal to exceed what was first offered. In other words, Abraham says "Let me get you something to eat." Could be anything, right? Maybe they are expecting a light snack.

But Abraham doesn't just feed them. He serves them wholeheartedly. Invites them into his home. Has them sit down. Washes their feet. Then lavishes quite a feast upon them. A feast that took considerable time to prepare.

Remember Abraham could not just go to the fridge and see what he had on hand. He had to run out to the herd, select a choice tender calf, butcher it, and then prepare the meal.

But that wasn't all! Was it? He asks Sarah, his wife, to make some special bread. Three seahs of flour, needed and made into bread. That's about 20 quarts of flour. That makes a lot of bread! May be that would feed the entire family or maybe yet it was enough for left overs to send with them once his guests were on their way.

This was going to be a production.

For Abraham, it was an honor to have these guests in his home. Not a problem, nor an inconvenience.

Do we show our guests this kind of hospitality? Do we receive them in the spirit that we would Jesus? If not, then we might be missing an opportunity to encounter the living God in our midst through them.

Now notice this one strange observation of the text. Abraham doesn't eat with his unexpected dinner guests. He serves them this feast and while they sat down to eat, Abraham stood off at a distance under the tree and waited for them to finish.

But why? Why wouldn't he join them?

Maybe Abraham is still uncertain who they are or what their intentions were.

Clearly was enough food, so it wasn't that. I think there was something else at play. Though it is before the Levitical Law and Kosher dietary rules were in place, I wonder if there was still this notion that God's people didn't eat with strangers, let alone Gentiles, because it might defile them. Abraham was playing into his cultural norms.

It wasn't until Jesus came and he turned these culture norms upside down that it was believed Jew and Gentile could sit down at the same table and enjoy the same food. The truth is that something very leveling occurs when we break bread with one another. It's so humanizing because we all eat. At the table, we laugh. We cry. We share stories about our lives, our loved ones, our hopes and dreams, and fears. Good food has a way of breaking down walls of hostility that once separated people into us and them.

We become family. We become children of the same God. We become one. That's communion.

What benefit then does Abraham get in return?

He received the awareness that he is in the midst of God. That the God of the Universe, the Creator and Sustainer of all things desired an intimate relationship with him. Little Abraham. Of all the people in the world, God sought him out and pursued him individually.

That same God pursues us in the same way. God want's relationship with each and everyone of us, as we are, warts and all. That is great news! Amen!

Abraham also received confirmation that the promises he had received from God previously would come true. That he and Sarah would conceive and bear a son. And Abraham would be the Father of many nations.

Remember, God always speaks in one voice. When we think we have received a thought, a word, or a promise from God...let us pay attention to how God confirms those words through other faithful people. And conversations around the dinner table are holy moments. We have opportunity to speak into people's lives in ways that we may not be able to at other times...because we have their full attention.

And finally how does this speak to our times around the table with one another?

The Stanford University Children's Health Clinic just published an article on "Why the Family Meal Is Important."² They argue that this time is a chance to connect, share the day's events, communicate expectations, deal with disappointments, celebrate victories, model healthy eating, teach proper table

² <https://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=why-the-family-meal-is-important-1-701> December 17, 2018.

etiquette, involve the kids in meal planning and preparation, table set up and clean up, and learning good family dynamics.

With the craziness of life, it may not be possible to do this every night, but they suggest starting off with once a week. Turn the television and technology off. Perhaps start conversation by sharing one's highs or lows for the day.

At Young Life Camp mealtimes are very important elements of our camping experience. We believe that at the table some of our young friends experience a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven for the first time. They are fed excellent food and as much as they want. Everything is family style so we have pass plates around. Here they understand what it is like to heard, valued, loved, enjoyed, and wanted. Perhaps for the first time. They are part of a caring family. God's family.

For some this experience is powerful that they bring it back home and ask their parents to have family meals together. I heard of one kid who actually made his mother go out and buy a table and chairs for their apartment so they could eat together.

My friends, if we aren't part of a dinners group, please join one. If there is a potluck or pancake breakfast at the church, please come to it. If you have other people living with you, please take time to have dinner together at least once per week. If people show up on your doorstep unannounced, keep a simple supply of hostess treats or food available to share with them. Whatever you do, do something to intentionally put yourself around other people where bread can be broken together and lives can be shared.

We just may be surprised how the living God shows up in our midst.

So may we remember to not only love one another well, but to welcome strangers for some have entertained angels. May we be attentive to the presence of the Triune God in our midst through others. And may others taste and see that the Lord is good at Cascades.

By the way...how do you introduce a hamburger? Meet Patty!

Come, Be Fed, Be Sent!