

Welcoming Strangers

Texts: Genesis 18: 1-8; Genesis 18: 16-33; Genesis 19: 1-13

June 21, 2020

So last night, I was eating a cup of cherry yoghurt before bed, and after the second bite, I could feel some of the cherry bits stuck to the bottom of the spoon. I turned the spoon over to see what treat I had, and I saw, to my horror, that the bottom of the spoon was covered with globs of cat food that had made it through the dishwasher. Eww, gross! Sometimes, things are not the way you had been led to believe.

Our Bible verses today have had that effect. But in this case, what you thought was dried cat food turns out to be something else. Let me explain.

First, we need a bit of background: Abraham was living in Ur, a city in what is now southern Iraq, in the lands of the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers.

God appeared to Abraham and told him to go on a 700 mile trip to the land God was going to show him. God told Abraham to become an immigrant to that new land the land that would eventually become Israel.

So Abraham took his wife, Sarah, and his nephew, Lot, and all their servants, and off they went.

When they got to the land, Abraham and Lot decided to separate so that there would be no disputes between them or their herders when tending the flocks.

Abraham said, "If you go to the right, I'll go to the left. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right."

Abraham let Lot decide where to go first, and fatefully Lot chose the well-watered plain of the Jordan River, in which there was a city called Sodom. He took his flocks there.

Abraham stayed in the land of Canaan, not far off from Sodom. In fact, he went to pitch his tents near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the God who had told him to become an immigrant there.

Why were those trees called the great trees of Mamre? Because they were on land belonging to Mamre the Amorite. Abraham was welcomed into his new country by Mamre, who was already there.

Abraham lived peacefully alongside Mamre, but Lot got caught up in a war between the king of Sodom and the king of Elam, and when the king of Sodom was defeated, Lot was taken as a prisoner, with all his family and all his possessions.

Abraham heard about this, and set out with 318 men from his household to recover his nephew Lot and all the goods of Sodom. He had to chase the Elamite raiders as far as

Damascus in Syria to recover Lot and all the other men and women of Sodom who had been taken prisoner, and all the goods of Sodom that the king of Elam had won.

The king of Sodom came out to Abraham and offered to let him keep all the rescued goods if only he could have his people back. Abraham gave the king of Sodom all his people back, and all his goods as well, refusing to take anything from the king of Sodom, except the expenses that Mamre had incurred in going with Abraham to recover Lot and the others.

Abraham the immigrant had fought for his nephew, Lot, and for the people of Sodom, to rescue their loved ones and to recover their possessions, and he asked for nothing in return.

Years later, when Abraham was almost a hundred years old and has been living in the land for a long time, our readings begin by telling us that the Lord appeared to Abraham as he was sitting near the great trees of Mamre.

From the beginning of the readings, we are reminded of the hospitality of Mamre the Amorite in sharing his land with Abraham the immigrant. After all these years, they are still known as Mamre's great trees.

Abraham looked up and saw three newcomers. Perhaps he remembered his own welcome in the land, and he rushed out to greet them.

We're not that far past Trinity Sunday, so I should point out that the early church loved this passage because they saw in it a hint of the Trinity. The text says that the Lord appeared to Abraham, but then there are three visitors, as if it were the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit coming as the Lord to Abraham.

So anyway, Abraham bows to the ground to honor the three visitors. He has water brought to wash their feet. He gets Sarah to bake bread for them, and he slaughters a young calf to feed them. He gives them curds and milk and the calf to eat, and he stands by under a tree while they feast.

Abraham is the picture of hospitality. Strangers are welcomed with open arms.

He has no idea who they are, no idea what they want or where they are going, no idea where they are from. He simply greets them. They are in need in the heat of the day, and he can help them, so he does. He welcomes them into his land as he was welcomed by Mamre into Mamre's land.

The Lord, in the guise of one of the men, tells Abraham that he is about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if the outcry against them proves to be true, if they really are as wicked as people are saying.

And Abraham pleads with God to spare his native-born neighbors. The whole scene reminds me of one of those scenes from the old show *Get Smart* where Maxwell Smart, secret agent 86, is captured by Kaos and is trying to bluff his way out.

“You don’t know this,” Smart says, “but at this very moment your compound is being surrounded by a crack team of Navy seals ready to break in and rescue me.” The Kaos agents don’t believe him.

So Smart says, “Would you believe a team of raw recruits fresh out of boot camp?” They wouldn’t.

So Smart says, “How about an angry troop of Boy Scouts armed with peashooters?”

Abraham is like that. “What if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom?” he asks the Lord. “You wouldn’t destroy the city if there are fifty righteous people there.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” says the Lord.

“What about 45? That’s only five less. You wouldn’t destroy a whole city for the sake of five missing righteous people, right?”

How about 40? 30? 20? Okay, don’t be mad at me, but what about 10 righteous people, and five mostly innocent donkeys?”

And the Lord says, “For the sake of ten righteous people, I won’t destroy it.”

We’re at rock bottom here, so Abraham lets it go at that. Abraham may be an immigrant, but he’s pleading with God for the safety of his neighbors, in spite of their being renowned for their wickedness.

But just what is that wickedness? We’re about to see. The two angels – hey, this is the first time we learn that two of them are angels—the two angels arrive at Sodom in the evening.

Lot is sitting in the city gateway. Why is he doing that? Well, it was usual for the men of the city to sit in the gateway and to talk. The gateway was like the local pub where all the men would hang out to discuss important city business and the local sports scores. Plus, it kept them out of their wives’ hair.

So Lot is not there alone. The other men of Sodom are there, which everyone at the time would understand, but which is totally obscure to us.

When the angels arrive, Lot is the only one to greet them. The rest of the men apparently just sit there, sulking and seething. They don’t know the visitors are angels. They just look like they might be more immigrants to their town.

Lot bows to the ground to greet the strangers, just as Abraham had done. Lot tells them to come to his house where they can wash their feet, just as Abraham had washed their feet.

The angels say they will stay the night in the square, but Lot knows that his neighbors don’t take kindly to strangers and immigrants, so he insists that they stay at his house. He feeds them there, just as Abraham had fed them. Lot is a master of hospitality.

But the men of Sodom are not. They want to show these men that they are not welcome. They want to show them who's the boss in Sodom, and that they are at the mercy of the native-born Sodomites. They want to show them that they can do whatever they want to them, that they have no rights in their city, and that they will be treated shamefully.

This is their great crime: they do not show hospitality to strangers and immigrants, but instead treat them as less than human and try to humiliate them as much as they can.

They go to Lot's house – they know all about the strangers and where they are staying because they saw it all at the city gate – and they demand to have sex with the men.

Why do they do this? Is it because they are all gay? Not at all! They could all have sex with each other if that were the case, but they don't. And they are perfectly willing to accept Lot's daughters, which Lot, who lives with them, knows perfectly well. The treatment of Lot's daughters is an outrage in itself, but one too many commentators pass right over. It's yet another crime in the Sodomites' long list of them.

But, no, the Sodomites want to have sex with the men because it's the best way they can think of to show their complete and utter dominance over these strangers. You are at our mercy and we can do, literally, anything we want with you.

We can tell it's really about the hatred that the Sodomites have for strangers and immigrants because they then attack Lot, who has lived among them as their neighbor for many years, and whose uncle, Abraham, had rescued many of them and their wives and their children—they then attack Lot by saying, "This fellow came here as an *immigrant*, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you – that is, their long-time immigrant neighbor Lot—worse than them, that is, worse than they were going to treat the strangers.

That is their great wickedness: they were hostile to immigrants and strangers, and they never accepted them into their city as citizens! They never showed them hospitality, never let them become neighbors.

How do I know this is what the passage is about, and not about that other thing that some try to force it to be about? Three reasons:

First, the passage is in obvious contrast to the reception the three strangers receive from Abraham. The stories are right next to one another, and Abraham and Lot's great hospitality is contrasted with the wicked inhospitality of the Sodomites.

Second, Hebrews 13:2 alludes to this passage when it says, "Do not forget to show *hospitality* to strangers, for by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to angels unawares." It's clearly talking about Abraham and Lot, as they are the only people I can think of who entertained angels unawares.

And third, Jesus says that's what it's about. In Luke 10, Jesus sends out the seventy-two disciples to spread the good news. This is what he says to them:

⁸“When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is offered to you. ⁹ Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’¹⁰ But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say,¹¹ ‘Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.’ ¹² I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

Jesus says that the towns that don’t welcome the disciples and the gospel with proper hospitality will be worse off than even that byword for bad hospitality, Sodom.

God insists on us showing hospitality; hospitality to the stranger, hospitality to the immigrant, hospitality to all who are in need. That’s good news to a church like ours, which prides itself on being welcoming. And even better news is that God continues to show hospitality to us:

Here is this table, the table of the Lord. Here God shows us hospitality in full measure, though we were once strangers to God.

Here God offers us a foretaste of the life in the realm of God, a realm where we will be immigrants to heaven, but also citizens, forever. Come, taste the bread and the wine, and experience God’s hospitality to you. God welcomes you to this table.

Amen