

October 16, 2011

Sermon Overview:

Are you ready to welcome God’s presence and word at anytime, even when God shows up unannounced and his identity is not disclosed? This is the question that Abraham and Sarah faced when three men appeared on their doorstep in the middle of the day, one of whom happened to be God. Unlike previous episodes in the Abrahamic narrative, this narrative has the characteristic of being jovial in its presentation. Through it, we find that God can and does show up at anytime, even during a lunch break on a mundane Monday afternoon.

Abraham showed himself more than ready to receive the visitors. Even without knowing their identity, he wastes no time in inviting them in and preparing a feast fit for God. Moreover, Abraham had mastered the *art* of hospitality, showing deference, and making it easy for the men to accept his offer.

While hospitality has become something of a lost art in the church today, especially in certain parts of the privatized western world, one cannot deny its importance in the Bible. Take Paul’s exhortation in Romans 12:13: *Contribute to the needs of the saints and pursue hospitality*. Or Peter’s instruction: *Show hospitality to one another without grumbling* (1 Pet 4:9). So important to gospel ministry is hospitality that it appears as a qualification for an Elder (Tit 1:8; 1 Tim 3:2). This is because hospitality is intrinsic to the character of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament, hospitality is rooted in God’s love for the sojourner (e.g., Deut 10:18). In the New Testament, hospitality is revealed more clearly as being tied to God’s character and love. As S.C. Barton suggests: “hospitality, for Paul as for Jesus before him, is not just a practical issue. *It is a fundamental expression of the gospel*: a response to God’s hospitality to humankind in providing Christ as the ‘paschal lamb’ (1 Cor 5:7) and an outworking of what it means to be members of the one ‘body of Christ.’” And, like Abraham, when Christians express hospitality, they open themselves up to God’s presence and word (Matt 25:34–40; Luke 24:13–32; Heb 13:2).

But God’s word isn’t always the easiest thing to accept. In fact, when God reiterates the promise that Sarah would bear a son, she laughs and says: “*After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?*” It becomes clear that God’s primary purpose in coming was to confront and transform Sarah’s cynicism and doubt. After Sarah denies her laughter, the Lord, somewhat whimsically, rebukes her. But it is a restorative rebuke: the one who can read her mind also has the power to open her womb. The key is found in the Lord’s rhetorical question in verse 14: Is anything too hard (or wondrous) for the Lord? The answer, of course, is a resounding no: nothing is too wondrous for God. We know that Sarah believes God’s word because by faith does what is necessary to conceive a child: she has sex with her husband, believing God’s promise over against what her aging body tells her. The passage is a beautiful illustration of God’s tender mercy.

Questions for Preparation and Discussion Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D).) Study based on the English Standard Version

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. Share with the group a time when you have either had a surprise visitor or had a “pop” test in life or at work. [D]

Looking at the Bible:

1. Abraham had mastered the art of hospitality. How does he make it easy for his guests to stay? [D]
 - a. Describe a time when someone made it easy for you to accept hospitality? [D]
 - b. What has characterized those people who made you “feel at home” in their presence? [D]
2. Read Romans 12:10–13 and 15:5–9.
 - a. What motives do the Roman Christians have for “welcoming one another (15:9)”? [P]
 - b. What is the goal of “welcoming one another”? [P]
 - c. Remembering that the church in Rome was deeply fractured between Jews and Gentiles, how might hospitality work against the divisions in this community? [D]
3. Why do you think Sarah laughs? [P]
 - a. Read Gen 17:15–17. Why does God rebuke Sarah for laughing, but not Abraham? [P]
 - b. Sarah denied laughing “because she was afraid” (v15). What was she afraid of? [P]

Looking at Our Hearts

1. At what times in your life are you expecting God to show up? In what areas and circumstances might you be missing him because you are unprepared? [P/D]
2. If hospitality is a fundamental expression of the gospel, then to the degree that you understand the gospel—that is, to the degree that you understand how Christ has welcomed you—you will welcome others. As honestly as you can try to answer the following questions:
 - a. How many times in the last 3 months have you invited new people into your home and life? If the number is sparse, why do you think that is? What things keep you from inviting others in? [D]
 - b. Do you think your friends find you hospitable? acquaintances? those you have just met?
 - i. What might hinder a person from describing you as warm and welcoming? [D]
 - ii. What practices might you adopt to become more warm and welcoming? [D]
 - iii. What beliefs and desires might you have to give up for this to take place?
3. When a recent multiple-month-visitor was asked to describe CPC, this person honestly said he/she felt a pervasive lack of warmth to outsiders and a lack of awareness of new people.
 - a. In what ways might we be unintentionally contributing to this feeling? [D]
 - b. In what ways might we be scared of or intimidated by new people? [D]
 - c. How might the gospel transform us in this? [D]
 - d. If there are newcomers in your group, please ask them to comment. [D]
4. God confronts and transforms Sarah’s cynicism and unbelief with a reminder that “nothing is too wonderful for the Lord.”
 - a. In what aspects of your life have you become cynical? [D]
 - b. How might this passage transform your cynical doubts? [D]

Praying for Each Other *(Use these suggestions alone or with other prayer requests to help focus your time in prayer together).*

- Pray that the gospel might transform us into a people who are always ready to welcome God and others into our lives.
- Pray that God’s supernatural power and goodness might overcome the specific manifestations of cynicism and doubt in our lives.