

A sermon preached at St. Martin's in The Fields Episcopal Church by the Rev. Deacon Timothy M. Ervolina  
on 29 July 2007, the Ninth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 12) - Year C

*Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15; Luke 11:1-13*

### **The Man Who Invented Chutzpah**

Now, Abraham had a rule: no one wandered through his vast land in Mamre without some good old Hebrew hospitality. He learned it growing up at his father's knee. There's no such thing as an unwelcome visitor. So when three strangers came wandering by his place up there under the oak trees, he went out to welcome them. "Y'all sit down awhile, and rest. The missus and I will whip up a little lunch. We can't have you going off to Salem or wherever it is you're headed without something in your bellies, and a little bit for the road."

So they came to spend the afternoon, sipping curdled camel milk and gnawing on roasted veal, and lying in the cool shade of the great oaks. The three of them never gave their names, but the conversation soon revealed that they were no ordinary wayfaring strangers. First, they told old man Abraham that his wife Sarah would have a child, even though she was ninety years old. And they even knew she was laughing behind the tent. Then they told Abraham that, not only would he finally have an heir to his great fortune, but that heir would go on to father a great nation, that would bring blessings to the entire world. It was almost the same thing that he'd heard in his dream several years ago, but you know how dreams are, and how when you wake up, nothing's really different.

As the strangers stood to leave, the one who was obviously the leader began to muse aloud. "I really can't go on to do what we've come here to do without letting Abraham in on it. After all, I just made a covenant with him. The poor guy deserves to know." He looked at the other two, who raised their eyebrows. They weren't about to disagree after all, but it was a bit strange. This covenant with Abraham sure seemed to change the way they did business.

"Abraham," said the leader, "come over to the rise here."

And Abraham, still not quite sure what all of this was about, and still very much the gracious host, followed to the top of the hill, that looked out over the plain of the Jordan, down upon the lush valley where the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah lay spread like shimmering white jewels.

The leader was quiet for a moment. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Abraham nodded. "Well, that maybe the way you see it, but I think there's something really rotten in that society. So, I've come to find out if it's as bad in Sodom and Gomorrah as I've heard. To see if the people who live there really care nothing for others, if they really do practice the rape and murder of innocent people who wander through their cities. And if it turns out the way I think it will, I'm going to wipe those cities off the map." And the other two strangers slipped off onto the trail into the valley below.

And suddenly Abraham knew who the strangers were. Yahweh himself, come with his angels, to bring judgment on people who have never believed in consequences. Abraham doesn't even think it's strange that Yahweh has been sitting in his tent, eating his food, making a covenant with him. He hasn't got time to think about how strange this is. His mind is racing like a great cat after an antelope. His own beloved nephew lived in that valley, and he and his family would surely perish in the fire of Yahweh's wrath. So he does what any reasonable person who's just spent the afternoon eating with the Lord of the universe would do: he starts to argue with Him.

"Now, hang on a minute. Are you going to just kill everybody? There are good people living there amidst all that lawlessness. I know for a fact that, in Sodom alone, there are at least fifty people there you'd actually like. Just because you're God doesn't give you the right to go and kill innocent people because they live in the wrong zip code! You're the Judge of the whole world! Aren't you going to act like it?"

Yahweh looks over at his chosen one. These mortals always think they know more than God. Make a covenant with a guy over a cup of kefir and the next thing you know, he want to run the universe. Yahweh sighed. "Tell you what, if that's true, I will spare the whole sorry mess."

But Abraham's not finished, not by a long shot. "Wait, you know, there might not actually be fifty good people, I don't know, I never counted. So what if there's only forty-five. I mean, really, five people and you blow the whole thing up?"

Yahweh figures it's a pretty decent deal. "Okay, if there's forty-five, I'm back in heaven like that." And he snaps his fingers.

Abraham looks back at the valley. He hadn't really seen much evidence of good people on his last trip down there. "Okay, so maybe there aren't even forty-five. What if you find forty people? Come on, you're God, forty innocent people is a lot of people."

"For forty, I'll let it go."

Abraham knows he's pushing his luck, but he persists anyway. "Now don't get mad at me, I'm just a mortal after all. But, what if you look really carefully, and you count them all, and it turns out there's only thirty? What then?"

Yahweh looks him up and down. This covenant was obviously going to try his patience. "Yeah, okay. I'll take thirty."

Abraham had made many a shekel trading camels and sheep, and fine silk garments from the east. He knew how to bargain hard. "Will you take twenty?" He grins a bit, to lower the tension.

"Twenty?" Yahweh nods. "Twenty will do."

But Abraham knows in his heart that twenty is a stretch. There's Lot, his wife, their two teen-aged daughters and their boyfriends. That's six. Maybe the boys' parents were nice people. Maybe they had a couple nice girls of their own at home. "Now, look, don't get mad at me, because I'm really trying hard here. But, suppose at the end of the day, you line them all up and you can only find ten good people? Please tell me you won't do this if you can find ten."

"Fine," says Yahweh. "Ten. That's it. I've got to go now."

And off walks the Ruler of the Universe, down the trail, into the beautiful doomed valley below. If you could have seen his face, you would have seen a great Divine smile.

Whatever you want to make of the encounter between the God who comes to dinner and the man who invented chutzpah, you have to admit that it's fun. It's got all the elements of good Hebrew story-telling: mystery, humor, doubt, faith, judgment, and before it's over, a good bit of sex and violence as well. And like all good Hebrew stories, it's as alive when you read it today as it was when the scribe wrote it down three thousand years ago.

And it's packed chock full of lessons for us twenty-first century believers who never expect God to show up to eat with us and rarely have the courage to expect the extraordinary to happen. The first thing we learn is that God is not at all bothered by our doubts about God or God's goodness. And that entering into a covenant with God brings us into a place of deepest intimacy with the Divine, a place where you can say anything, ask any question, feel any uncertainty and you can never break the intimacy.

The second thing we learn is that God is right there, laughing at your corny jokes, sipping your wine, eating right alongside you. What we Anglicans call the Real Presence. That Presence is not Something far away, some Watchmaker God who created the universe long ago, wound it up and then went somewhere else more interesting. No, this is a God that's willing to listen, to comfort, to be a friend like no other you could ever find. Someone who accepts you as you are.

St. Paul writes to the Colossians that they should "continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving." Because God loves you just the way he found you, whether you're a wandering Aramean, living in under a great stand of oaks, or just a lonely seeker trying to make sense of the senselessness that passes for modern life.

The next thing we learn from this Really Present God is that God is not really impressed with religious devotion. There are those who want to turn Christianity into a long, hard religious marathon. They will give you all kinds of rules: "Wear this, don't eat that, keep this holy day, pray this way, vote for this candidate, believe you're in the only group God loves."

Or, they will throw philosophy at you, the kind that hides behind hermeneutics and dialectics and demythologizing stories like the one about Abraham and Yahweh, bargaining over Sodom and Gomorrah. They'll tell you that faith is toxic and prayer is impotent and God is a delusion. They'll tell you that all the things wrong with the world are because some people choose to believe that there's something greater than themselves that gives meaning and hope to their lives. And when you stand at the crest of the ridge, tears streaming down your face, because you can see the fire below, the lives crushed, the pain of human cruelty and the devastation of war, they'll tell you that's just the way of the world, the survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle. Sometimes they even masquerade as people of faith, but the only God they worship is made of the hubris of Empire packed down into the blue steel barrel of a gun.

The final thing that we learn from Yahweh's bargain with Abraham is that prayer is not some mysterious thing that we use to change God's mind or tell God something that God doesn't know. Prayer's purpose is to change us, to help us focus, to keep us open to God's Presence. It's a funny thing, don't you think, that in virtually every Christian congregation, on virtually every Sunday we pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples? We pray the words, while missing the point.

We pray that prayer, in Matthew's elongated form, because we think that it will get God's attention, that God will notice and say, "Oh, you need your daily bread, why I almost forgot, here you go. And don't forget to forgive your brother-in-law or I'll have to give you cancer."

That prayer of Jesus requires asking and searching and knocking. It requires risking the foolishness of belief, the pure chutzpah of hope. "Ask," says Jesus, "and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if your child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

That prayer of Jesus is supposed to change us into the kind of people who are concerned with bringing God's rule into this world, who can rest assured that our Really Present God lives in our midst through that wonderful Presence we call the Holy Spirit. The prayer of Jesus is supposed to create in us hearts bent towards justice, which long for peace and the end of human suffering. That prayer of Jesus is to show us the way to bake the bread for the child who begs for it and plant the seeds that will become tomorrow's loaves. The prayer of Jesus is to remind us that, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we really can change the world.