

January 11 & 12, 2025

A New Way | Welcome

Genesis 18:1-15 & 21:1-2

Pastor Paul Dean

In my hometown a set of railroad tracks went right through the center of town. We are on the I-10 corridor and so there was a lot of train traffic. And our house was right across the street from the tracks. We got used to the noise, but we also got used to one other phenomenon. People would ride those trains, in box cars and other places and the train would stop right by our house. And, especially during the summer, people would come up to our house and ask for water and or food. We, as a family, were used to these requests because our dad was the leader of the town ministerium – which was a gathering of churches who would pool resources to help those in need. Usually, gas money or help to find a place to stay. And these people would either call or come to the house looking for my dad.

Total strangers knocking at the door asking for the most basic of needs. Under my mom's watchful eye, we'd fill their water containers from the hose. We'd bring them peanut butter and honey sandwiches. You know doing human stuff with other humans. It was an interesting way to grow up. We would sit in the grass and hear their stories. Where they came from and where they were going. And then the train would rev up and they'd jump back, I'm sure hoping that at the next stop they'd find other humans who would treat them like humans. I learned lots of things through that experience. Life is more complicated than it looks. Poverty can afflict any of us. And, even the smallest gesture, the smallest welcome goes a long way to bring hope and healing.

Some cultures are really good at welcoming strangers. In some cultures, it would be unthinkable to turn the stranger away from your door. This was the kind of culture Abraham and Sarah lived and breathed and because of their welcome their lives were going to change as well as the entire world.

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. ³ He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on-- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Genesis 18:1-9

First, Abraham does not know what we know. Abraham did not know that he was encountering messengers from God. Abraham's welcome of the stranger isn't influenced by anything other than his hospitality. Also... what we read in the story right before Abraham encounters these strangers is that Abraham, his son Ismael and all the other men in this group had just been circumcised.

So, there is Abraham, recovering from a medical procedure, sitting in the shade at the hottest time of the day, seeing these strangers stands up and runs... runs to them. In pain, in the heat of the day Abraham doesn't send Ishmael or one of his servants which would be an extension of his own hospitality. He does it himself. He sends for water and then goes and asks the matriarch... again... not another member of the family or a servant, he asks Sarah to make the bread. Then he goes and picks out the best calf of his herd and has it prepared... for three strangers.

And then he stands by them while they eat, the initial welcome led to hospitality which led to room for conversation, which opened up the space for one of the most important questions ever asked in

scripture, "Where is your wife, Sarah?". Without the welcome, the open-handed hospitality, that question doesn't get asked. And it is one of the most important questions ever asked in scripture because God has made a promise to Abraham and the answer to that question changes the world.

The strangers, the messengers from God speak so that Sarah can hear.

¹⁰ Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Genesis 18:10

Now Sarah's reaction is completely normal. Sarah and Abraham are old, real old and there is absolutely no way that they could have a child. Absolutely zero chance, and she has a good laugh. And why not, the whole notion is absurd. However, the messenger is clear, calls her out, she tries to cover it up.

¹³ The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh." Genesis 18:13-15

It's interesting that the messengers ask Abraham why Sarah laughed. Can you imagine Abraham saying something like "I don't know. We've been married for 70 years, and I still don't have clue". However, Sarah speaks for herself. And in the story, who has the last laugh? God does and it's a joyful, wonderful laugh... and I suspect that Sarah laughed that way too.

The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.

³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. Genesis 21:1-3

And this whole story starts with a welcome. A welcome of a stranger. Abraham's stance in the world was one of being open-handed and through that open-handed welcome the world changed. Sarah became a carrier of the promise and gave birth to Isaac who became the father of Jacob who is named Israel.

I wonder what would have happened if Abraham met these strangers with a closed hand instead of an open hand. It seems impossible for Abraham to do though. Abraham and his group demonstrated time and time again their open-handed welcome. From the very beginning God knew who Abraham was.

²⁹ Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰ Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. Genesis 11:29-30

We are going to unpack these verses in the podcast this week but from the beginning God knows that God can work with Abraham because in marrying Sarah Abraham knew that he would never be a father. Abraham knows how to sacrifice, and God can work with someone who knows how to sacrifice. In fact, God seems to work best with people who practice sacrificial love, whose open-handed welcome changes the world.

Here at Prince of Peace we seek to follow in Abraham's footprints by being open-handed with our welcome and here is how.