

A pop quiz. A surprise inspection. Such things are often disconcerting.

If you know an inspection or an evaluation is coming, you can prepare for it and make sure you're on your best behavior. The real test is when you're unprepared. That's when a truer and more realistic picture is available.

In our lesson from Genesis this morning, we see God paying a surprise call on Abraham and Sarah. Abraham had been promised that if he would follow God, God would bless him with numerous descendants. More descendants than grains of sand on the beach. More descendants than stars in the sky.

Over the next few weeks we'll be focusing on that promise. The ways Abraham responds, both positively and negatively, have much to teach us.

This morning, we have God visiting Abraham. This is something of a test. God appears incognito. How will Abraham and Sarah respond when they don't know that it's God who's paying them a surprise visit?

The reading begins, "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."<sup>1</sup>

Notice 3 things. 1. We're told that it's God, but Abraham doesn't know that. 2. Abraham is sitting under the awning of his tent. 3. It's the heat of the day. It's the time in that very hot desert climate when everyone tried to rest in the shade. It was simply too hot to work.

Then Genesis says, "(Abraham) looked up and saw three men standing near him."<sup>2</sup>

We know that God is among them. The Jews regarded this triplet as God and 2 angels. Christians often view this as an early appearance of the Holy Trinity.

In fact, the Orthodox Icon of the Holy Trinity is of 3 Angels at Abraham's tent. But remember, Abraham has no idea who they are.

Nevertheless, Abraham runs from the tent entrance to meet them, and he bows down to the ground. In other words, he is treating them as honored guests. Even though they are complete strangers, he makes them feel welcome.

He says, "'My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 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.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 18:1

<sup>2</sup> Gen 18:2

<sup>3</sup> Gen 18:3-5

What's Abraham doing? He's offering what hospitality demands. A little water, a little bread, and a little shade for travelers during the heat of the day. The travelers accept.

But what Abraham does next is interesting. He runs into the tent and tells Sarah, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes."<sup>4</sup>

Three measures. So what? Well, 3 measures of flour is about 10 gallons. That's a lot of flour. He's offered them (quote) "a little bread." But he's asking Sarah to prepare an enormous and lavish amount of bread for his guests.

Then, he runs selects a calf and tells his servant to prepare it. And then he takes the curds and milk and the calf, and HE himself serves his guests while they are resting in the shade.

Abraham is a man of power and property. Yet he acts as servant to his guests. Instead of resting in the shade himself, he and his household do everything they can to provide an abundant welcome for these three unknown men. Instead of the little bread, little water, and little shade that custom demands, Abraham overwhelms his guest with a huge amount of bread, plus veal, milk, and cottage cheese.

This speaks so well of Abraham. Abraham isn't doing the minimum his society expects. Abraham is overwhelming in his generosity, even to complete strangers. For this part of the surprise inspection, Abraham passes with flying colors: A+++.

After lunch, the focus begins to shift. The men ask about Sarah. Up until this point in Genesis, God's promise of descendants was made only to Abraham. It was unclear whether these descendants would be through Abraham's wife Sarah, or through one of his slaves or concubines. I'll have more to say about that next week.

But now, we're being told explicitly that Sarah is being brought into the covenant too. The promise of descendants will extend to her and through her.

God says, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."<sup>5</sup>

In due season means literally next spring. This is not a far off "someday" kind of promise. This is a really specific kind of promise. Next spring, you and Sarah are going to have a son.

Genesis reminds us that Abraham and Sarah are old, and that Sarah is post-menopausal. At this point, Sarah is 90 and Abraham is 99.

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<sup>4</sup> Gen 18:6

<sup>5</sup> Gen 18:10

Thus the promise of a son is a bit ridiculous. If 3 strangers showed up and told some 90 year old woman that she was going to give birth next year, she wouldn't believe them. Neither would I.

That's Sarah's response. Sarah overhears the guests. She doesn't believe them, and she laughs to herself.

She says "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" There's something intriguing in this verse. And the English translation tries to clean it up "I'm old, my husband's old, shall I have "pleasure?" The literal translation is actually pretty graphic. She's saying, "I'm worn out, or dry. Shall I have abundant moisture?" It's a sexual euphemism. Sarah is asking, "Will my body produce lubrication the way it did when I was a young woman?"

Now, I'm not trying to be gross here. But there's a very important point. It's spiritual nearsightedness. Now, to be fair, neither Abraham nor Sarah know that it's God talking.

But look at God's promise. You'll have a huge number of descendants, beginning with a son. You and your 90 year old wife are going to have a son. That's a huge, wonderful, and amazing promise.

But Sarah does something that we do. God is making this huge promise. But she's focuses in very narrowly. God promises a baby. Sarah gets tied up in whether at her age she can even have any vaginal moisture. God promises this (*expansive/huge gesture*). Sarah's hung up on this (*narrow/small gesture*). And so, she laughs at God's promise.

But God hears her laughter. She's busted. God says, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'"<sup>6</sup>

And then the clincher comes in with the line: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" That's a vital question we'll come back to at a moment. "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" And then God reiterates the promise. "At the set time I will return to you, in due season (in the spring), and Sarah shall have a son."<sup>7</sup>

And then there's a cute little exchange in Sarah says, "I did not laugh." But God says, "Oh yes, you did laugh."<sup>8</sup>

I always think that's like a Monty Python sketch. "No I didn't." "Yes you did." "No I didn't." "Oh yes you did."

But later, in ch21, in the spring, when the child is born, guess what they name him? Yitzhak, Isaac, literally "Laughter." They give birth to a son, and they name him laughter. "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"

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<sup>6</sup> Gen 18:13

<sup>7</sup> Gen 18:14

<sup>8</sup> Gen 18:15

And that's the question for us as well. God tells us this (*expansive/huge gesture*). And we're hung up on this (*narrow/small gesture*). "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?"

And in effect, we often answer, "Yes." There are some things that God cannot do. We often end up trying to limit God, when God wants to give to us abundantly.

We end up acting like God is only good for a few important, but limited things in our lives. "Oh sure, God forgives my sins. God gives me a good spiritual buzz sometimes. God offers me some sort of moral compass in living my life." But that's so narrow. Those are wonderful things, but they're so narrow compared to the big picture.

What does the Good Shepherd say? "I came to offer you a few minor improvements? I came to give you a few little tweaks here and there?"

No. The Good Shepherd says, "I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly!"

God wants to offer you this (*expansive/huge gesture*). Living life in all of its fullness. Living as you were created to live. Living the way your programmer and your designer intended before the virus of sin crept in.

Yes, life has its problems. And it's important to take them to God and offer them up in prayer. But don't get so focused in on this (*narrow*) that you miss out on this (*expansive*). Don't get so distracted by the little things of life, that you miss out on the glorious promises of God.

"Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" Sarah thought the answer was yes. But it turned out to be no. No. Nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. Everything is within his power.

"Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" I pray that you will find the same answer as Abraham and Sarah. God wants to offer you this (*expansive*). Nothing is beyond his power.