

## THREE MEN AND A BABY

Genesis 18:1-15

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on June 15, 2008, Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*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. 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. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favour 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.’ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 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.*

*They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ 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. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?” 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.’ But Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. He said, ‘Oh yes, you did laugh.’*

With this title, you may think that this is a Father’s Day sermon, but it is not.

- A more appropriate title for such a sermon would perhaps be “A Man and Three Babies,” though with Patrick’s news today, “A Man and Two Babies” might suffice.

The reality is I chose this title because it was a popular movie in 1987, and because it bears witness to at least one level to what happens in our text today.

### I.

In the heat of the day, three men visit Abraham as he sits outside his tent under the oaks of Mamre.

- When Abraham sees the three men, he breaks out into a fit of Middle Eastern hospitality.
- He runs to meet the men.
- He bows his face to the ground.
- He offers the men water and bread, and, true to form, enlists his wife Sarah to prepare the food.
- Abraham himself goes into his field, takes a calf and presents it to the three men along with milk and curds the calf has produced.
- The men prepare the calf and hunker down for a feast.

As the meal settles and the sun sets, the men ask Abraham the whereabouts of Sarah.

- Abraham nods toward the tent.
- One of the men says: “In due season, I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.”

- All four men hear Sarah laugh from within the tent, and the narrator diplomatically informs us that Abraham and Sarah are “advanced in years” and that “it ha[s] ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.”<sup>1</sup>

Three chapters later, a son is born to Abraham and Sarah; they name him Isaac, which means “Laughter.”<sup>2</sup>

## II.

If this story rings a bell with you, you probably remember it

- Because of the wildly outrageous promise to Abraham and Sarah
- Because of Sarah’s laughter
- Or because of a beautiful phrase in the middle of the story: “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Any of these is worthy of a sermon, Father’s Day or not.

But today I want to talk about the “three men.” There is a mystery about these three that opens us to a deeper subject of how we experience visitation from God in the tight confines of our lives. So let’s look carefully at these “three men” who promise a baby.

## III.

First, the narrator identifies these visitors mysteriously.

- At the outset of the story, we read that “*the Lord* appear[s] to Abraham.”
- In the next sentence, we read: “Abraham...[sees] *three men* standing near him.”
- When Abraham exercises his profuse hospitality, the visitors are again identified as “*men.*”
- Yet when Sarah laughs, they revert to being “*the Lord.*”

The movement within this passage is from *the Lord* appearing to *three men* appearing to *the Lord* appearing again.

Neither Abraham, Sarah, nor the narrator comments on this changing identification of the visitor or visitors, but Jewish and Christian scholars throughout the centuries have pondered this mystery.<sup>3</sup>

- Some say that it is God who appears to Abraham and Abraham simply fails to recognize God.
- Others say that three men appear to Abraham and, in a fit of superstition, Abraham thinks they are God.
- Some say that the people of Abraham’s day were so superstitious that they thought God appeared on earth in the form of three men, leading the writer to write this way so the readers could understand what was happening.
- Others say that the writer himself was so superstitious that he thought God appeared on earth in the form of three men.
- Finally, some maintain that this is just a nice, heart-warming tale reminding us to extend hospitality to strangers in case we might be entertaining angels unaware.<sup>4</sup>

There is a grain of truth – and a worthwhile sermon – in each of these interpretations.

## IV.

The sermon I offer today is different from any of these interpretations. The approach is not original with me; it comes from James Kugel, a recently retired professor of Hebrew at Harvard. Kugel is an orthodox Jew among whose books is the recently published *How to Read the Bible*. What Kugel writes about the three men is fresh, energizing, and challenging to calm and sober Presbyterians like me.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:1-15.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 21:1-7.

<sup>3</sup> These are simplified versions of those arguments summarized in James L. Kugel, *How To Read The Bible: A Guide To The Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 107-118. The comments throughout this sermon from Kugel are taken from these pages of his book, in a chapter entitled “Two Models of God and ‘The God of Old.’”

<sup>4</sup> The New Testament Letter to the Hebrews articulates this understanding of this story in Hebrews 13:2.

Kugel points out that since about 600 BC, 2600 years ago, three beliefs about God have been ingrained in Jews and Christians. There are:

- God is all-knowing
- God is all-powerful
- And God is everywhere.

Omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. These are characteristics we have in mind when we say the word “God.”

But Kugel points out that in some ways, these characteristics hinder us from accepting a more personal (perhaps more primitive) experience of God. Kugel points out that often in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament:

- God is not everywhere simultaneously.
- On the contrary, God often goes from one place to another....sometimes on a swift cloud,<sup>5</sup> on a cherub,<sup>6</sup> on the wings of the wind.<sup>7</sup>
- God says to the builders of the Tower of Babel: Let us *go down* and confuse their speech,”<sup>8</sup> which implies that God is not “down” at the time He speaks but rather somewhere “up,” presumably in heaven. In either case, God is not both places, not everywhere.
- God walks in the Garden of Eden at the cool of the evening.<sup>9</sup> Walking is not something you do if you are omnipresent.
- When Adam and Eve hide, God calls out, “Where are you?”<sup>10</sup> and later God asks Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”<sup>11</sup> God does not necessarily know the answers to these questions. God does not necessarily know everything.

Kugel maintains that as God appears in the Bible:

- God has an actual body, a discrete, physical being.
- Numerous passages refer to God’s “face,” “hand,” “eyes,” “ears,” “arm,” “fingers.”

Kugel writes that when the Bible depicts God in this way, it represents “a completely different way of conceiving” God than the philosophical concepts of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. God is much more human than all-knowing, all-powerful, and present everywhere.

In our story, when God alternates between being Himself and being three men who appear outside Abraham’s tent as strangers, God more closely resembles a human being than philosophical descriptions we construct and use to describe him.

## V.

So if Kugel is correct, what does this mean for us? What does it say to and about our faith?

First, to counter Kugel a bit, to think of God as all-knowing, all-powerful, and present everywhere can be comforting.

- Even though we sometimes don’t want God to know everything we do or think, in the long run, it is comforting to think that God knows everything, particularly if we believe that God is forgiving.
- I would rather have God know everything that I have done and forgive me for it than to live with the illusion that God doesn’t know everything and to spend time and energy trying to hide things from God.

There is distinct comfort in the God of philosophy.

But it is also liberating to think of God with human characteristics, as a God who comes and goes, who acts and sometimes doesn’t act, who has the power to know all things but on some things prefers to ask.

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 19:1.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 22:11.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 68:4.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 11:7.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 3:8.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 3:9.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 4:10.

Listen again to Kugel:

- God is in some ways like a human being, although, of course, He is *powerful*: indeed, the power to do and control things that humans cannot is actually what defines the crucial difference between God and us.
- Rather than being omnipresent, God...is frequently said to move about from place to place, and He apparently does not automatically...*know* everything. (He can find things out, but that is not quite the same thing.)
- As for where God is: normally, He is simply *elsewhere*, behind the curtain of everyday reality, but from time to time He crosses into this world, our world.
- When He does [cross into our world]...so locked are [we] into [our] usual ways of perception...that [we] miss even the most obvious clues as to His real identity—[we] are in a fog [just as Abraham was in a fog concerning the identity of the three visitors to his tent].
- But then, suddenly, the truth dawns on [us as it did to Abraham and Sarah], and [we] realize that God is right there in front of [us].

Kugel concludes: “God does not dwell in the abstractions of omniscience and omnipresence; instead, He is right [here], ready to *enter* and *cross over* into the human sphere, though unrecognized at first.”

## VI.

By now you may be wondering if I have been working too hard, spending too much time in the heat. After all, we are Presbyterians, and we are not too much given to God being so personally close.

- Are we really supposed to believe that all those stories in the Bible where God walks and talks and speaks are not just symbolic?
- Are they are not just ways of depicting God to people whose IQ is less than ours?
- Do they really represent the way God is?

Maybe I have been spending too much time in the sun. But I think not.

You see, like you, I am quite comfortable with abstract terms for God like omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence.

- Part of the reason is that these terms fit my love of the rational and the life I receive from the life of the mind.
- I can think about God in these terms and still keep God under my control.

They put distance between me and God; and when it comes to matters holy, I like the safety of distance.

But...what if....?

- What if these philosophical terms we use to describe God are like bars at the zoo that keep the pandas on one side and us on the other but never let us really get to see or touch the pandas?
- What if these intellectual categories are like cages that prevent us from feeling the tremendous threat of the lion as she roars with disdain and threat?
- What if these concepts are like the glass windows on my high-rise condominium, through which I see window-washers outside strapped like monkeys, but which prevent me from asking them how they do their amazing work or offering them a cup of cool water in the heat of the morning?
- What if these philosophical descriptions are like conversations we have in which we talk about love without experiencing love, in which we read about travel without traveling ourselves, in which we analyze our finances without making any decisions?
- What if these terms are like video games in which we attach our name to a running back, but, if he fumbles or his team begins to lose, we hit “exit game” and create another player more to our liking?
- In fact, what if this whole enterprise – central to Western Civilization and crucial to the Presbyterian Church – of trying to relate to God through the mind is a game itself, a game whose name is Avoidance and whose stops along the board are “Avoidance of Feeling” and “Avoidance of Action”?

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Kugel concludes his comments on the three men visiting Abraham and Sarah with a well-known story about the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal. When Pascal died over nearly four hundred years ago, those who removed his body found stitched inside the lining of his overcoat these words:

Fire.

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob.

Not the God of philosophers and scholars...

The world has not known You, but I have known You.

Joy! Joy! Joy!

Tears of joy!

For Pascal, God stepped from behind the curtain and startled him with a visitation near the end of his life.

Maybe, just maybe, God has stepped from behind the curtain for us, startled us, in Christ, with a visitation – most horrendous, most holy, bringing fire...and tears of joy.