

In the Heat of the Day

The longest day, the first day of the summer season in the Northern Hemisphere, will occur at 7:26 a.m. on June 21. As we enter this new week, the days will continue to lengthen just until this Saturday! But, even though the daylight hours will then slowly begin to shrink, the hottest days of the year are yet ahead for us.

My memories of life on the Nebraska prairie include memories of hot summer days. The heat of the day produced strong winds as the broad open spaces offered a gathering place for waves of shimmering air. It brings to mind the old poem... “who has seen the wind, neither I nor you...but when the trees are bowing down the wind is passing through.” So it is with heat, certainly we feel heat, but we are also able to see it. In Nebraska, mirages on the rangeland beckon thirsty cattle, and the rising radiant air distorts the horizon. In the heat of the day...the grass withers and the animals seek after shade. In the heat of the day, we come upon Abraham and Sarah at home in their tent.

The hours of the early afternoon are most commonly the hottest ones. *Even when it is not hot*, these hours are for many of us challenging ones. At midday, we often feel lethargic and long for a nap. That’s how I envision Abraham...as this story unfolds.

Abraham is seated on the door of the tent which was part of the settlement that Abraham and Sarah had established by the oaks of Mamre – a plain among the mountains west of Dead Sea. (You may remember that Abraham and Lot had outgrown their communal space. In order to ease tensions, the two families had chosen different geography to inhabit. Lot chose to go eastward to the plain of the Jordan, while Abraham remained in the hill country of Judah.)

Abraham and Sarah had grown old, the day was hot and it was early afternoon. I can just see Abraham seated in the shade of the tent door, head nodding with sleep. The story teller, however, gives *us* a heads up. As we look in on Abraham, *we’re* told that the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre. Abraham, stirring from his daydreaming, looks up to simply see three men standing near to him. This is what I envision... the heat waves are shimmering across the arid ground and Abraham blinks twice to be sure that his eyes aren’t playing tricks on him. With a start, Abraham jumps from his seat, running to extend words of hospitality to the travelers. It almost feels like the travelers have come too close for comfort before their presence was discovered. (Like answering the ringing phone while napping...one quickly attempts to sound alert and awake!)

In this lively account, we glimpse the beautiful practice of *offering* hospitality and *accepting* hospitality. The afternoon passes with food and conversation when suddenly an unlikely question is posed. “Where is Sarah, *your wife?*” If only we could only see the expression that might have crossed Abraham’s face at this question.

In a prior conversation with God – one where God gave words of introduction – God had said to Abraham, “As for Sarah, your wife...I will bless her... I will give you a son by her...I will bless her.” Gen. 17:15. I wonder...did the voice of the visitor suddenly have a ring of familiarity to it? Did the words evoke that sense of “what’s going on here??” attentiveness (Like the Emmaus Road disciples ☺)? Remember, these guests had arrived unexpectedly, in the heat of the day...when no one was feeling all that alert. Suddenly, everything’s different. Maybe this question also caused a twinge of guilt to pass through Abraham’s gut...when strangers were around Abraham had a history of introducing Sarah – not as his wife – but as his sister! Only a simply stated question, but a question that draws one to the front of ones chair...no more lounging sleepily in the shade!

The next words bring conclusive evidence to Abraham that these are not ordinary sojourners. Words of promise of a son...not a son by any other woman...but a son with Sarah are repeated. Abraham had heard these words before. Earlier, as mentioned – we were told that Abraham had received a visit from God...At first, Abraham fell on his face in awe. As the Lord continued to speak of his plan for Abraham and Sarah, Abraham again fell to the ground, this time with laughter at God’s announcement. On this day, however, it is Sarah, hiding behind the tent door, who laughs. And why not, right alongside the promise of a baby, come the words of reality... “Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advance in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.” Yes, these facts about Abraham and Sarah were true **and** they were going to have a baby! (This is such a fun text to read to really old people! They understand it best.) In addition, if you happen to read the ending of chapter 17, you’ll see that there might even be more irony to this pronouncement. The preceding account is that of the circumcision of the household of Abraham. We read that Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin! The next thing we know, he’s to be fathering a baby! No wonder Sarah laughed! (What a text for Father’s Day!)

What about this laughter??? Incredulity, speechlessness, expression of disbelief at something that - in spite of its out-of-the-question audacity – tantalizes with playful possibility. Eugene Roop writes, “Almost always someone laughs... when we get close to the boundary between dream and reality. We laugh at the possibility that the dream might become reality. We laugh when the promise and the dream come to be.” Roop, *Genesis-Believer’s Bible Commentary*, pg.124. (As we find ourselves at this unlikely, unexpected, unheard of birthing of the Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, haven’t we, too, experienced such laughter! David – I well remember a month or so ago – the boyish delight that I saw in your laughter as we marveled at God’s leadings among us.)

Friends, as of late...where have you found yourself laughing under your breath? *Pay attention!* Can we entrust possibilities to God, ones that go beyond our desires for control, ones that move our responses from “yes, but” to “well now... what do you know!” I would invite us to hear this great story as the story of God, not as the story of Abraham and Sarah. (Let me note that I don’t understand this story offering a formula of faith for couples bearing the pain of infertility.) Instead, I hear growing awareness of life

while still barren – *in spite of barrenness – birth, stirrings of life within an empty womb.*
We witness the greater miracle of *alongside barrenness – fruitfulness.*

“God – the one who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” Romans 4:17 This outrageous God invites us to walk with lightness of being; eyes and ears open to the possibilities that exceed our wildest imaginings. As we remember the unlikely development in the lives of Sarah and Abraham, may we open ourselves to the surprising work of God among us – individually (for this happens to Sarah and Abraham in the most personal and intimate of ways) and congregationally (Isaac’s birth was not about Sarah and Abraham much at all; instead came as a gift of blessing for all peoples and all nations.)

It seems rather easy for me to put these words on paper, but it’s a bit of a different story when I allow this account to find its place closer home. *Sarah, the woman in the tent, behind the flap of the open door...that’s me. Maybe it’s each one of us...* hoping and longing...trying to figure out the future...wishing that the past could have been different...feeling responsible that God gets it right...feeling responsible that we get it right...making some choices that only complicate matters for everyone...

Often, when given opportunity to share a sermon or to lead a meditation, I sense a quickening within and –briefly- a happy anticipation arises. Yes, it is this desire, this awareness of holy visitors that draws me to the tent door, but then...another voice wells up...an editor that reminds me of my limitations, of “how things are,” of time that has passed never to be reclaimed... of hopes and dreams that can’t have a future – because of the past...and I shake my head with cynical laughter. “Yeah, right...” Chokingly, not only the words, but life itself begins to line up behind the censor...waiting like a child engaged in the birth canal with a mother unwilling to let the new, next step of release take place. What a painful place – (resisting conception?) resisting birth!

Friends, I need your help to remember, *to believe...* that all of life is God’s story, not my story... yet, perhaps it is better stated that all of life is God’s story **and** my story...God’s story **and** our story - a story ever opening before us – a story not limited either by my *smallest* dreams or my *biggest* fears, a story not limited either by our *biggest* dreams or our *smallest* fears. Sarah and Abraham embraced (apparently so !!) the invitation to participate in God’s creative ways. Can I, can we...enter into this great story even when it doesn’t make good sense, when it defies reasons, even when it’s laughable?

Worship – June 15, 2008

In the heat of daily life, when we feel weary and dull, when options seem few...when age creeps in... let us remember and *believe* that God delights in our welcome. We find ourselves behind the tent door – **and** we long to step beyond it. In the heat of the day, we find ourselves dozing – **and** we wish we could shake the sleep from our eyes... Oh yes, I know it's crazy, but come on...let's go, let's wake up...for holy visitors are at the door!

AMEN