

“Making Space for God”

Genesis 18: 1- 8

June 18, 2017

Rev. Dalene Vasbinder

God is good, all the time and all the time, God is good!

How very blessed we are to be able to set aside time in our lives to come together in praise of our God! For that IS what this time of worship is about, to turn our thoughts and hearts to sing praises to God as we have this morning; ‘the God of Abraham praise, all praised be the Name, who was, and is, and is to be, is still the same; God’s love shall be our strength and stay, while ages roll. (Can I get an ‘Amen’? It’s ok, every now and then!)

God is good, all the time and all the time, (God is good!); A God of faithfulness: Great is thy faithfulness! Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed thy hand hath provided – Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me! Have you been able to see those new mercies, morning by morning? Have you made space for allowing yourself time to get a glance and relish all that God’s hands have provided?

How good it is to come together to sing praises to our God, to make space in our lives for the Holy!

And sometimes in our lives that are fast paced, demanding or maybe changing, unsure, it’s oh so very hard to find that space for God.

There’s a Zen story about creating that space. As the story goes, a Japanese Zen master, Nan-in, once received in his home a university professor who came to inquire about Zen (a form of Buddhism). The university professor talked nonstop. Nan-in welcomed the professor graciously, and began to serve tea. He poured the visitor’s cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow with dismay until he could no longer restrain himself. “It is overflowing!” he shouted at the Zen master, “No more will go in!” Nan-in responded, “Like this cup, you are also over full. You are full of your agendas, opinions and speculations, your own thoughts and desires. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

It’s so very hard to make space for God’s love, God’s grace, God’s morning by morning mercies when our cups are over full.

For most of us, I would imagine that it’s not easy to make space for God, allowing ourselves the awareness of the goodness of God in our midst. In our story from today’s scripture, Abraham is doing just that! But it’s in a way that we might not think about; usually when we think about making space for God it has to do with setting aside time in the day for prayer, coming to church, being aware of our surroundings like on my country mile walk. But Abraham shows us that another way to make space for God is through extending hospitality and making space for the stranger.

“Now the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre.” We who are reading and listening have an advantage. We know that it is the Lord who has appeared, Abraham, on the other hand, looks up and just sees three men standing near him in the heat of the day. Not a good time to be out on the road. Abraham most likely thought they had come seeking shelter in the shade of the oak trees that surrounded his and Sarah’s tent, in this place where they had settled to make their home for awhile. Abraham looked up, saw the three strangers and followed the laws of the desert practiced among the nomadic peoples of the Near East, still practiced among the Bedouins today. (“The Stranger in Our Midst” James, Kathlyn, August 10, 1997, p. 1). The laws required that if a stranger appeared at your tent, you were to welcome them, and share your food, drink and shelter. In the desert, in the heat of the day, it was a matter of human survival.

And so, in the next eight verses, Abraham does just that. “Come, sit under the shade of the tree and refresh your feet and yourselves with some cool water. Let me offer you a little bread so that you may have the strength to go on...” Abraham scurried off and began barking orders first to Sarah, “Hurry, kneed some bread with the finest of flour!” and to the servants, “prepare a calf” and then took the feast of butter, milk and calf and put it before them, standing under a tree while they ate, almost as if a waiter ready to refill their water glasses or bring a new serving of beef!

United Methodist Minister Kathlyn James points out in her article “Strangers in Our Midst” that from that point on, hospitality to strangers appears often. When the Hebrews wander in the wilderness, God provides them manna and water, a gracious host. When the refugees finally enter the promised land and settle down, hospitality is written into their holy law: ‘Love the sojourner’ is written in the book of Deuteronomy, “for you yourselves once wandered in the land of Egypt.”

Hospitality, extending welcome, making space for the other, important in the New Testament as well and a prime indicator of one’s relationship with God. Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” And there is the scripture from Hebrews that echoes today’s story, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.”

“Angels unaware.” Abraham didn’t know the three strangers that appeared in the heat of the day were the Lord and two angels. What he did know was that the law of the desert, and later a command of our faith, told him that he was to make space for them, provide hospitality to them.

Making space for God sometimes means making space for the other, for the stranger in our midst; providing hospitality.

When we think of hospitality, we may think first of making sure the house is clean, that we have enough food, drink, clean towels set out, etc. But through our Biblical texts on the subject, we are reminded that hospitality is just as much an attitude out of which such generous actions naturally flow. It’s a habit of the heart which has to be cultivated in order to grow, not often coming naturally. More natural to our lives is the mindset of ‘stranger danger’ and ‘folks not

like us'. Oftentimes instead of an attitude of hospitality, there is an attitude of hostility toward the other. Our biblical texts challenge us to turn the stranger who is perceived as outsider into a guest. And in doing so, how often do we experience the Holy, come face to face with God as we make space in our hearts for the one thought to be 'the other'?

Our scripture story for today continues with the Lord, still a guest in Abraham's eyes, giving him news that Sarah will have a son, fulfilling the blessing given to them many years prior, a blessing that they had given up on. Would he have heard this news, would Sarah's laughter have filled the tent, if he had not welcomed the strangers into his midst?

We've experienced the same, haven't we? As we opened our doors to the Sengas, our lives as a congregation became richer and more full. We made space for God by making space for the stranger. When those of you who serve a hot meal at Maxwell Presbyterian, extending hospitality to the stranger in our community, I am sure that you find in the end that you have made space for God to enter into your hearts. (article Make friends with other faiths)