

The Third Sunday after Pentecost, 18 June 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the Name of God who loves us each into being in all our uniquenesses. Amen.

I want to begin with the beginning and ending of one of the poems on today's handout.

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,

it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

I find the whole poem very wise – and helpful, especially right now.

This is a day to think of many things. The collect describes us, the whole Church of God, as “God’s household”, that is as God’s extended family. We are the family of God, but we are not all the same and we do not pray to be all the same. but to be steadfast, that is, to stay strong and committed in our relationship with God and one another. And this is a challenge, when God created us each uniquely. And all those variations can really challenge us! I think the poem’s perspective is very helpful in working through those challenges.

The first thing that struck me in the readings was that long list of names in the Gospel, specific individuals. We today tend to talk about ‘the disciples’ and ‘the apostles’ and ‘the early Church’, general collectives as if they are an undifferentiated whole. but here they are each named as individuals. James and John, those loud sons of the fisherman Zebedee, Matthew the tax collector, and so on, specific people with highly varied skills and styles and backgrounds. They have each been called as individuals to play a specific part in Jesus’ ministry and in the establishment of ‘God’s household, the Church’. This helps us to accept the uniqueness and variation within our own small subsets of that household. This particular list contains only men, only Jewish men, and the specific job they are given is to bring healing only to Jewish people, not even to their kin among the Samaritans or their neighbors who might be Roman or Greek. This is a specific ministry task for specific individuals, which will lay the foundation of future work for God’s family. It is a wonderful example of exactly what the poem is talking about.

I think it is important and helpful to remember the specificity of these narratives. It is not telling us that all ministry should only be among Jewish people forever. It is showing us these specific people called to their specific tasks. one important implication is to recognize that all our ministries are distinct and specific. We are not all the same or called to the same things - and our differences do not make us any less part of the household of God.

Turning back to the opening reading we find Abraham again. Since last week he and Sarah and their extended family have been following their nomadic existence according to God’s call for close to a quarter of a century. Here we find the scene which provided the visual inspiration for the Trinity Icon we had at worship two Sundays ago. Imagine it, twenty-five years of wandering is a perfectly normal way of life for nomadic herders, but 25 years of living faithfully into God’s promise of founding a new nation, of progeny as many as the stars in the sky, without any noticeable result is definitely remarkable.

Think about it - Abraham was about 75 when he had his first revelation in which he gave his heart to God in response to the call and promise. Heading off into the unknown took courage and commitment. Remaining faithful with nothing to show for it, no evidence that there would be any offspring for 25 years is truly remarkable. Abraham kept asking, trying to understand, but stayed faithful. So now - after 25 years of this - they receive visitors at their encampment. and they follow the essential rules of hospitality critical to nomadic people: visitors are made them welcome, offered shelter and water and food. That is how people survive, by depending on hospitality. This time Abraham does not at first realize that he is again in conversation with God - but he is told that in fact the descendants are about to begin - that Sarah will soon be pregnant and give birth to the firstborn of the new people to live in this relationship with God.

It is not surprising that neither Abraham (now about 100 years old) and Sarah (at least 75 herself) should find such an announcement highly improbable. In fact Sarah, discretely inside the tent listening to the conversation, understandably burst out laughing at the idea of getting pregnant at her age by a husband still older. All things are possible with God, but certainly some things are highly improbable! But after the visit and the laughter comes the baby who is named Isaac, whose name forever echoes the laughter of disbelief with which Sarah encountered the prediction of his birth as well as the laughter of joy with which she welcomed his improbable birth. And so, the family of Abraham begins, after a lot of conversation and wandering and listening and following. It is not easy or instant to become the household of God.

Between these two narratives about specific individuals living out very specific calls as members of God's household we found one of those passages from Paul that are such a challenge to translators. One speculation is that Paul dictated his letters, perhaps because of failing eyesight, which is why we often find such convoluted syntax, much to the annoyance of many lecturers. I actually enjoy Paul's mind, and especially his heart, so I am willing to follow him through the sometimes twisted sentences. The heart of this passage speaks directly to the stories of the other two readings, when he says, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." It is easy to see that played out in the long wandering adventures of Abraham and Sarah culminating in the birth of Isaac. Abraham became the first patriarch by enduring all of those misadventures, all of that time in lands ruled by various hostile people, hanging onto the promise of God. He and Sarah certainly demonstrate extraordinary endurance and they not only hold onto hope; their hope is not disappointed. I think these stories, especially when we can really relate to them as genuine human experience, help us to better engage in the adventures and challenges of our own specific lives in our own times and places.

In our time this weekend brings the newest of our national holidays, a celebration which has existed in many communities around the country for a century and a half, but only recently became a national holiday. Tomorrow is the official Juneteenth holiday – and it actually is the 19th, the original day of celebration, the day in 1865 when Major General Granger decreed the official liberation of all the enslaved people in Texas, last in the nation to be freed, 2.5 years after the Emancipation Proclamation and 2.5 months after the General Lee's surrender at Appomattox. Free at last after hundreds of years. This holiday has been celebrated with rodeos and barbecues and parades, all kinds of community gatherings. It is a celebration of hope and of endurance, a celebration of the fruits of 'keeping on keeping on' and of mutual support. It celebrates the embrace of all people in our society and an opportunity to proclaim that we are indeed all in this together, through the suffering that has produced endurance, which has produced character, and given us hope – hope for a future of mutual respect and support, of hospitality like Sarah and Abraham's that welcomed strangers through whom they received God's blessing.

Over the years Juneteenth has felt to me like a celebration about celebrating, about enjoying the opportunity to party together, share stories, find companionship – like a big family reunion.

If we are the household of God, the family of God, we should be embracing one another and offering hospitality to all, bringing healing to everyone that God puts in our path. My favorite line of Paul's is actually quoted on our message board out front, 'Rejoice in the Lord always.' I hope that we will all find ways to do that today and tomorrow.

Today's handout includes my contribution to your celebrations, once again brought to my attention over the years by *Journey with Jesus*. First, there is a famous poem by Maya Angelou, expressing the resilience of the people who are still oppressed and yet still and always rise up. Then there is the wonderful poem I quoted at the beginning. It is by Bishop Ken Untener, drafted in 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. Archbishop Oscar Romero was martyred the following year and the poem mysteriously came to be attributed to him. Later, Bishop Untener included it in a reflection on the anniversary of Romero's martyrdom titled "The Mystery of the Romero Prayer." The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him – or probably even read by him, but they speak to his life of service and suffering and hope. It speaks eloquently about each of us having a part to play in God's work, only a small part but our own, and essential to the whole.

I hope that you will take time to read the two poems, holding in your heart all your hopes for this community and what you contribute to it, and looking ahead to the wonderful and unexpected things that God will do among you. Amen.

A Future Not Our Own by Ken Utener
In memory of Oscar Romero (1917–1980)

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession
brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives include everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted
knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of
liberation in realizing this.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's
grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the
difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador, was assassinated on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass in a small chapel in a cancer hospital where he lived. This prayer was composed by Bishop Ken Untener (1937-2004), drafted for a homily by Cardinal John Dearden in 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Romero, Bishop Untener included it in a reflection titled "The Mystery of the Romero Prayer." The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him.

Still I Rise BY MAYA ANGELOU *Best to listen to a recording of her saying it*

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

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 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." 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." The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

Psalm 116:1, 10-17 *Dilexi, quoniam*

1 I love the LORD, because the LORD has heard the voice of my supplication, *
because he inclined his ear to me whenever I cried out.

10 How shall I repay you, O LORD *
for all the good things you have done for me?

11 I will lift up the cup of salvation *
and call upon the Name of the LORD.

12 I will fulfill my vows to the LORD *
in the presence of all the chosen people.

13 Precious in your sight, O LORD *
is the death of your servants.

14 O LORD, I am your servant; *
I am your servant and the child of your handmaid;
you have freed me from my bonds.

15 I will offer you the sacrifice of thanksgiving *
and call upon the Name of the LORD.

16 I will fulfill my vows to the LORD *
in the presence of all the people,

17 In the courts of the LORD's house, *
in the midst of you, O Jerusalem. Hallelujah!

Romans 5:1-8

Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Matthew 9:35-10:8

Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.

Opening Voluntary TBD

Entrance hymn Spread, O spread, thou mighty word 529

NO Gloria

Psalm *spoken*

Gospel Acclamation

Cantor sings Alleluia; **All repeat Alleluia.** Cantor sings verse; **All repeat Alleluia.**



Cantor: The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1:15)

Offertory Hymn Christ for the world we sing! 537

Sanctus S 124

Lord's Prayer *spoken*

Fraction Anthem Lamb of God S 161

Communion Music TBD

Closing Hymn Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim 535

Closing Voluntary TBD

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Is Anything Too Difficult for the Lord? By Dan Clendenin. For Sunday June 18, 2023

Lectionary Readings ([Revised Common Lectionary](#), Year A)

Genesis 18:1–15 or Exodus 19:2–8

Psalms 116:1–2, 12–19, or Psalm 100

Romans 5:1–8

Matthew 9:35–10:8

This Week's Essay

I've had exactly one dream that I can remember in which I laughed out loud. I don't remember the dream, I just remember how pleasant it felt to laugh in my sleep.

As for jokes, our family likes to say that we laugh three times — when we hear the joke, when it's explained to us, and when we finally understand it.

Then there's nervous laughter that isn't at all funny. I remember a strategic meeting of our church leaders when a friend asked an awkward but important question. The result was predictable — nervous laughter.

The Genesis story for this week revolves around human laughter — in particular, the dismissive laughter of incredulity, and then some clever word play about that laughter. The matriarch Sarah laughed at God's improbable promise to her, and then she lied in an effort to deny her doubts. It's a deeply human story.

Standing at the entrance to their tent, Sarah eavesdropped on Abraham as he conversed with three travelers who were visiting them, and who prophesied that "about this time next year Sarah your wife will bear a son."

In fact, this was the second time that Abraham had received this promise; when he heard it the first time he "fell face down, laughed, and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'"

Sarah responded in the same way as Abraham when she overheard the stupendous suggestion: "So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?'" The ecstasy of erotic pleasure? The joy of a newborn baby? Sarah laughed in disbelief.

But God rebuked her for her doubt, at which point she then lied and denied: "Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, 'I did not laugh.' But he said, 'Yes, you did laugh.'" (17:17; 18:10–15). Sarah doubted and denied, she laughed and she lied, because of the "absurd disproportion between the divine promise and the human possibility."

Her response was entirely human, and not really surprising. From a human perspective her disbelief was warranted, even appropriate. People don't procreate in old age. But her unbelief also elicited a rhetorical rebuke in the punch line of the narrative: "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (18:14).

When I was in seminary forty years ago, my classmate Phil coined a term for that sort of religious faith that has a firm and unwavering belief in a tame and innocuous divinity, faith that doesn't have any expectation that God will meddle in human affairs, intercede in your life, providentially guide human history, care for a loved one, heal the hurts we suffer, or — God forbid — do the impossible.

Phil characterized this sort of tepid faith as "functional deism." Functional deism never denies the existence of God, but it also never expects God's decisive action in your personal affairs. And so God rebuked Sarah for her timid faith in a tiny god.

God didn't shame Sarah in a punitive manner. Quite the contrary. We read that "the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised."

In a delightful double entendre, Sarah and Abraham named their son Isaac, which in Hebrew means "he laughs." Their son of laughter would always remind them of their own disbelief, when each of them laughed at God's promise, but also testify to how God fulfilled his promise and acted in their personal history despite improbable circumstances.

Whereas at first Sarah had brought her dismissive laughter to God's promise, in the end the tables were turned: "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me. Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age" (21:1–7).

The story of Sarah's dismissive laughter and coverup lies conveys not only an appropriate rebuke, and a reminder of God's mighty power to act in the most hopeless of circumstances. The narrative also communicates a sense of consolation.

We normally think of Abraham and Sarah as paragons of faith and virtue, and with good reason given how differently the New Testament remembers them (cf. Romans 4:18–25, Hebrews 11:11, and 1 Peter 3:6). But the original Genesis story demonstrates how God's drama of salvation is not a story of stellar saints so far removed from our own experiences that we could never hope to emulate them, but of down and dirty sinners, messy characters portrayed with glaring faults and failures.

Acting out his own fears, Abraham lied about his wife Sarah (Genesis 12:13). Both he and Sarah scoffed at God's promise of progeny. Commenting on the untidy and unsavory nature of the Biblical characters, Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

One of the remarkable characteristics of the biblical way of training us to understand history and our place in it is the absolute refusal to whitewash a single detail... The history in which our Scriptures show that God is involved is every bit as messy as the history reported by our mass media in which God is rarely mentioned apart from blasphemies. Sex and violence, rape and massacre, brutality and deceit do not seem to be congenial materials for use in developing a story of salvation, but there they are, spread out on the pages of our Scriptures. It might not offend some of us so much if these flawed and reprobate people were held up as negative examples with lurid, hellfire descriptions of the punishing consequences of living such bad lives. But the [biblical] story is not told quite that way. There are punishing consequences, of course, but the fact is that all these people, good and bad, faithful and flawed, are worked into the plot of salvation. God, it turns out, does not require good people in order to do good work. As one medieval saying has it, "God draws straight lines with a crooked stick." He can and does work with us, whatever the moral and spiritual condition in which he finds us. God, we realize, does some of his best work using the most unlikely people.²

I take comfort in knowing that my own doubts and denials, the lies I tell myself to rationalize my disbelief, and the times that I scoff at the likelihood of divine intervention in my puny affairs, are not only standard fare for human nature, but also the unwieldy material of God's salvation history. They might deserve a divine rebuke, but they don't constitute an ultimate obstacle to divine action in my own little story.

NOTE: Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 140-141.

Weekly Prayer

Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

Flickering Mind

Lord, not you,
it is I who am absent.
At first
belief was a joy I kept in secret,
stealing alone
into sacred places:
a quick glance, and away—and back,
circling.
I have long since uttered your name
but now
I elude your presence.
I stop
to think about you, and my mind
at once
like a minnow darts away,
darts
into the shadows, into gleams that fret
unceasing over
the river's purling and passing.
Not for one second
will my self hold still, but wanders
anywhere,
everywhere it can turn. Not you,
it is I who am absent.
You are the stream, the fish, the light,
the pulsing shadow,
you the unchanging presence, in whom all
moves and changes.
How can I focus my flickering, perceive
at the fountain's heart
the sapphire I know is there?
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I Am Sending You By **Debie Thomas**. Posted 07 June 2020. For Sunday June 14, 2020

Lectionary Readings ([Revised Common Lectionary](#), Year A)

Exodus 19:2-8a

Psalms 100

Romans 5:1-8

Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

In his book, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, tells the story of a young Jewish woman named Etty Hillesum. Hillesum was in her twenties when the Germans occupied Holland. She was not a conventionally religious person, but between the years of 1941 and 1943, as she watched her world descend into nightmare, she became deeply aware of God's hand on her life. Imprisoned in the transit camp at Westerbork (before being shipped to the gas chambers of Auschwitz), Etty wrote these words: "There must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?"

Williams describes Hillesum's commitment this way: She decided to occupy a certain place in the world, a place where others could somehow connect with God through her. She took responsibility for making God credible in the world. She took responsibility for God's believability.

I've been thinking about these phrases all week. *Making God credible in the world. Taking responsibility for God's believability.* How do you feel, reading them? What visceral reactions, if any, do they trigger? Alarm? Excitement? Longing? Fear? Does it ever occur to us that these phrases might describe our vocation as followers of Christ? Is it possible that we are called to make belief in the kingdom of God credible for the world we live in? Not just when belief is easy, but also — and especially — when belief feels impossible?

If you're like me, you're reeling from the events that have rocked the United States over the past two weeks. I'm sure I'm not alone in lacking words to express the frustration and sorrow I feel. *Once again*, we must mourn a black man's senseless murder at the hands of abusive police. *Once again*, we must confront the deep, insidious racism that poisons this nation's core. *Once again*, we are called to repent of our history, grieve with our African-American brothers and sisters, and insist on the justice that is now centuries overdue. *Once again*, we are summoned to render God's good news credible in a dark hour.

In our Gospel reading this week, Jesus commissions his twelve disciples to liberate and enliven the "harassed and helpless." Seeing the multitudes of "sheep without a shepherd," Jesus is deeply moved, and so he tells his disciples, "Go." Go and proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Go and cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, and cast out demons. Go and touch. Go and heal. Go and resurrect. Go and make peace.

Go and render believable the compassion of God.

Needless to say, this commissioning is for us as well. Are you scared yet? Hang on — Jesus has more to say. After explaining to the disciples what their task is, he offers them some appalling operating instructions: "You received without payment; give without payment." "Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts." "Take no bag, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff." And (saving the zinger for last): "I'm sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves, so be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. You will be dragged before governors. You will be handed over to councils and flogged. You will be hated by all because of my name."

Um, really? Let's see if I have this straight:

- Prioritize those who have nothing. Go to those who have no one to advocate for them, no one to hear them, no one to attend to their needs. Go to the harassed, the mistreated, the oppressed, and the exhausted. Knock on their doors, and place yourselves at their service. Humbly accept *their* hospitality. Learn the art of dependence. Do not live and minister above or apart from the people you wish to help — live among them. Engage them. And do so deeply.
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- Choose poverty, simplicity, and vulnerability. Carry no weapons. Stockpile no resources. Have no back-up. Abandon your egotism. Do not parade in like a savior, basking in pomp and circumstance. Lead instead with quietness, gentleness, curiosity, and humility. Insofar as it depends on you, keep, make, and share the peace. Remember that power has been given to you for one reason, and one reason only: so that you can give it away.
- Don't be foolish. Be wise. Be attentive. Listen. Know the complexities of the world in which you move. Make every effort to understand what's happening beneath the surfaces. Be pure of heart, but don't revel in ignorance, flatten reality, or mistake naïveté for faith.
- When you've done all of the above — in other words, when you get all of this just right — expect life to get pretty grim. Know that lots of folks will distrust you. Understand that many well-meaning people will yell and scream at you. Expect to get rejected, called out, wounded, beaten. Don't be surprised when your life gets uncomfortable. This is what success looks like.
- Do not despair. You are not alone. The Spirit of God is with you, and the Spirit will give you the words you need and the courage you lack. Remember, grace abounds, so don't lose heart. The one who endures to the end will be saved.

Are you scared *now*? Make no mistake: this is a confrontational Gospel. It's hard. It's demanding. It's offensive. In it, Jesus asks us to surrender absolutely everything for the sake of making God credible to a world that's convulsing in pain — and he does so without reservation or apology. His harsh-sounding instructions suggest that there will be times when our faith requires us to violate cultural norms, fight uphill battles, and speak dangerous truths to power.

If our overriding priority as Christians is to secure our own comfort, then we cannot follow Jesus. Discipleship will disorient and disrupt us. It will make us the neighborhood weirdos. It will shake things up in our families, churches, and communities. It will expose evils in the status quo we cling to. It will humble us to our knees.

As our reading from the epistle to the Romans so eloquently puts it: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." So often we Christians try to skip straight to hope and hunker down in its promise. Yes, the Church is called to profess hope. But hope is not the same thing as clueless optimism or premature consolation. Hope has no meaning if it's not undergirded by justice. Notice the trajectory: suffering, endurance, character, and THEN hope. The fact that our salvation is free does not mean it comes cheap.

To make God believable here and now is to stand in the hot white center of the world's pain. Not just to glance in the general direction of suffering and injustice, and then sidle away, but to dwell there. To identify ourselves wholly with those who are aching, weeping, and dying. In the case of America's longstanding racial crisis, making Christ credible

means moving beyond denial, beyond willful ignorance, and beyond the Band-aid approach of “thoughts and prayers.” It means deciding, as grateful followers of a brown man who died at the hands of brutal law enforcement two thousand years ago, that we will not tolerate the demon of racism in our midst for one more generation.

Why does Jesus ask so much of us? Because he gave us so much. “You received without payment. Now give without payment.” Maybe, if we can put aside our reluctance and our fear, we will feel the weight, the power, and — dare I say it? — the *glory* of this calling. Jesus calls us only to what we were created for. Jesus knows the cure for our brokenness, our malaise, our boredom, our angst. He knows that when we go out into the world in his name, healing what is diseased, resurrecting what is dead, and casting out what is evil, we participate in the transformation of our own souls. What we’re hearing in these days is the very heart of God within us, deep calling to deep, the Spirit crying out on behalf of a world desperate for justice and mercy. Will we listen?

Someone has to live and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. So ask yourself: *Why shouldn't that witness be me?*

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The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 15 June 2008

Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR

The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector.

Welcome to Graduation Sunday, the Sunday when we celebrate those in our extended family who have completed programs of study and preparation, and are ready to go on to the next step in their lives.

Graduation, commencement – it is all about stepping along the way, moving forward, moving always into the future. Modern theologians have emphasized the fact that our understanding of God is as one who is always calling us into the future, part of the always-changing reality of our lives. God is always ahead of us, drawing us onward – not static, waiting for us to catch up – not behind us, pushing us, – but ahead of us, moving always into an unknown future, drawing us with him into the promise of that future, ready to help us and guide us each step of the way.

As we celebrate those whose names are in our bulletins and to whom we are giving gifts, we recall others known to us and loved by us who are taking important steps in their own lives. It was just as I was preparing this sermon, that I realized I should have included my son Jonathan in our list. He is receiving his Masters Degree this month, but this particular step is so integral to his Doctoral Program that it scarcely feels like a separate event. Step by step we go through our lives, sometimes marking particular steps and sometimes letting them blend into the ones before and behind.

We celebrate particular people making special steps, people who can feel their lives changing in significant ways. Their changes, their accomplishments, their new opportunities, represent the new things that come to each of us each day.

Other people might wonder why the Church has this habit of celebrating graduations of its members and their families. What has this to do with the Church, after all? We began today with a collect in which we asked God to look after ‘your Household the Church.’ We talk of ourselves as ‘God’s family’, ‘Christ’s Body’, the ‘Community of Faith’, and so on. Today we are described as the ‘Household of God’. That means, among other things, that the Church is our home – whether we feel like beloved children, or unworthy slaves, or inept servants, or stewards in charge of far too much – no matter what our relationship seems to be at any given moment, this is always our home.

This is God’s household and we are each and all part of it. So it makes sense to us that we celebrate changes in the lives of the other members of the household. We celebrate new births, new jobs, new homes. We celebrate anniversaries and birthdays. We celebrate marriages. We celebrate deaths. We celebrate the steps taken by us as individuals and families, because all of those endings and beginnings affect everyone in the household.

This season of graduations makes us particularly aware of change. We see all around us endings and beginnings, openings for something new.

Our faith teaches us that change is a good thing, that change is to be expected in our lives with God, just as science teaches us that change is a necessary condition of life. So we celebrate it even when it may be surprising or uncomfortable.

Today’s story in Genesis is particularly appropriate to this season of change and new beginnings. Abraham and Sarah are living the always changing lives of nomadic herders, sleeping and eating in their tents, moving from place to place to provide good pasture for the animals, to be where there is water, to follow where God leads them.

Today they are at a place called Mamre in a stand of oaks, which doubtless provided welcome shade – and water. While they are in this place, visitors approach. Abraham, the man of God, is keen to live out the bedrock rule of nomadic life, the law of hospitality. In a life that is so precarious, looking after one another is critical. So Abraham greets the arriving strangers with enthusiasm and energy. He drops all of his own concerns and rallies everyone to provide greeting and welcome, sustenance and rest to these people he does not know. (It is in reference to this story that the expression about ‘entertaining angels unaware’ developed.)

Abraham knew that visitors were to be welcomed, whatever they might bring with them. And in this case they brought promise and change.

The divine messengers accept the hospitality, and promise that when they return Sarah will have a son. This will be a major change for this couple who have lived for so many decades trusting in the Lord's promise of offspring without the least sign of progeny. In fact it is such a major change that the very suggestion makes Sarah laugh. She and her husband are in their 90's and pregnancy at that point was no more probable then than it is now.

So Sarah's response to this new thing was to laugh. Of course she was embarrassed that she was caught laughing – because that was not living up to the great hospitality they were trying to offer. But she did laugh. And that laughter was out of surprise and skepticism, the laughter that comes when someone says something that cannot possibly be true, however much one would like it to be, the kind of laughter that sometimes bursts from us without our control.

But the messengers were right. Sarah and Abraham had their miracle son, born when Abraham was 100 years old. This was a new step for them, as it is for everyone who becomes a parent. Becoming parents requires us to live into the future, to be always looking for the next change, the next promise, the next hope, the next opportunity.

The son who was born was named Isaac in reference to the laughter at the announcement about his coming. And Sarah laughed again, with joy at his unexpected advent, commenting that in his name everyone who heard the story of his long-awaited birth would laugh with her, laugh with joy at the generosity of God, at the new life that came to them.

This is a story of hospitality and wonder, a story that tells us about God participating in the new steps of our lives. In fact the event of the three visitors invited to sit and eat under the oaks at Mamre is painted as an icon of the Holy Trinity in the Orthodox tradition, as Deacon Mimi mentioned in her Trinity Sunday sermon. The icons, like the story, provide beautiful images of the complex and loving participation of God in our lives.

Our part of the household of God joins today in celebrating the new steps in the lives of Maren, the two Jeffs, Josh, Sarah, Natalie, and Benjamin. Each story is different. Each person has had different challenges and different triumphs in completing this particular graduation step. Each person is being offered new opportunities to learn and grow and contribute. And we rejoice with them, pray with them, and, like Sarah, laugh with them, as you will see at the presentations.

Our gradual hymn, 'Lord of all hopefulness', speaks of the steps of each day's life, the homely steps of ordinary daily life, movingly connected to God at every changing moment. It is our prayer that each of the graduates we acknowledge here today and each person in our church household will find God with them at each step of their lives.

In Edinburgh two weeks ago, as we were walking home from worship followed by a community lunch at the local parish, my son commented, "That's what I like best about Church. Wherever you go in the world, you are immediately at home." We are indeed one household, part of God's own household, welcome and belonging, connected to one another forever.

The hospitality that Abraham showed his guests is part of the nature of the church household, and our connections not only cause us to embrace those who come from far away but also to take joy and pride in the accomplishments of everyone connected with us.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks for the accomplishments of all those we celebrate this weekend and ask your blessing upon each of them and upon their families as they take the new steps you set before them on their life's journeys, through Jesus Christ our Savior, who calls us all into your household and family, united by Holy Spirit, forever and ever. Amen.

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The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 29 August 2010

The lectionary is certainly helpful in encouraging us in our exploration of our annual theme of Hospitality which we began on Saint James Day.

The Epistle to the Hebrews today is reminding us once again of the hospitality of Abraham under the oaks at Mamre. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." Abraham and Sarah scrambled about their tents to provide bread and wine and meat for the passing strangers – strangers who turned out to be angels, messengers from God to assure them of the truth of God's promises, that despite all common sense they would soon have a child and begin the line which would generate progeny more numerous than the sands of the seashore or the stars in the sky.

When we think about hospitality, what it can mean in our lives here at Saint James and our lives in our neighborhoods and workplaces, it is useful to think about Abraham and Sarah. Let us imagine ourselves out in the hot and dusty world of the Near East. We are traveling with camels and donkeys, sheep and goats, and assorted other animals, with relatives and herders and various slaves. It is a struggle to keep all of us fed and watered in this dry countryside, but we are managing well, with skill, determination, and trust in God, who led us out here, away from our comfortable home in Ur. Here we are at Mamre, where the oaks and terebinths indicate reliable water for us and our animals – and where two trade routes cross so that we might have opportunity to trade for other necessities.

This is a good place to be, a place for rest and prayer. And here come some visitors. They have an aura of importance about them, which certainly helps prompt our welcome.

But more important than that, they seem to be on their own, without flocks or herds or a caravan of supplies. Survival out here is helped by the water, but more is needed. So we would surely offer hospitality to anyone who came by. We understand that essential rule of nomadic people, that the stranger is welcomed to food and drink and shelter – because that is the only way human beings can survive in such an inhospitable environment.

Here in 21st century Oregon, if someone stops by one of our houses, we usually have something in the cupboard or the refrigerator to offer. It is relatively easy to be generous. Not so out in the wilderness.

There is water at Mamre, so that is not hard. But any wine or grain we have has been carried a long way, is part of a precious store. Sarah cooks them some sort of bread or cake – not from a mix, but probably beginning by grinding the grain, mixing ingredients, building a fire, and so on. Then the centerpiece of such generous welcome tends to be the meat – not grabbed from the freezer and thawed in the microwave. An animal is chosen from the herd, killed, drained of blood, butchered, and then cooked. This is a lot of work! And this is the hospitality they freely offered to these people they had never met, setting an example for all time of ‘showing hospitality to strangers and thus entertaining angels unaware.’

I believe that whenever we truly welcome strangers into our lives, into our communities, we are entertaining angels, messengers of God. I do not mean that each one will have a specific message as life changing as “Your elderly wife will have a baby next year”! I mean that at each such encounter, in which we open ourselves to the new person, the stranger, we open ourselves up to whatever God is wanting to do in our lives, whatever God is wanting to say to us at that particular time.

The logical corollary to this is that whenever we ignore the stranger, neglect to provide welcome and hospitality, we are likely to be missing part of the blessing that God has for us. Fundamentally, I believe that we should welcome the stranger because that is how we are meant to live, as individual representatives of the infinite love of God for each individual. But, selfishly, we do not want to miss out on any gift that God may have to offer us!

Sometimes thinking about that beautiful scene under the oaks at Mamre makes me feel rather ungenerous. How easy it is for us to simply walk someone down to coffee hour compared to all that time and effort and personal cost Sarah and Abraham put into welcoming their strangers. But I do not believe that is how God sees it. Our efforts may not involve all of the mess and sacrifice of ancient nomads, but they often involve rising about our own shyness, or personal pain that would keep us alone. Whatever we may be feeling at any given time, welcoming people is always an opportunity to be part of God’s blessing to the world.

As I have mentioned before, hospitality is a way of living. It encompasses all our interactions. Perhaps we start by taking the visitor to coffee hour, showing the new family to the nursery or Sunday School, conversing with the person off on his own, helping people with the books in worship. But as we look at each unknown person as a messenger from God, as a child of God to whom we are privileged to show God’s love, this affects how we drive our cars. It affects the courtesy and concern we show to clerks and wait staff, to the letter carrier and the meter reader. It affects how we interact with a new neighbor and to the one who has always lived down the street but with whom we have never had a conversation. It affects how we relate to the person at the next desk, to our bosses, to our subordinates.

It is a valuable spiritual exercise to learn to see each person we encounter as an angel, a messenger sent by God to give us the opportunity to live into the love we have been promised.

The old translation of the line from Hebrews says, “entertained angels unaware.” The translation we heard today is of course correct that this means “entertained angels without knowing it.” But I like to think that often the angels themselves are unaware. Clearly Abraham and Sarah’s angels knew exactly what they were about. But I think very few people go about with the awareness that they may be vehicles of God’s grace in the lives of everyone they encounter. God may be offering hope or promise or encouragement or a new direction through any one of us. And we may never know. We do not need to know. We simply need to accept the opportunity to embrace each opportunity for interaction with gratitude and an open heart, to meet angels and to be angels.

It would, of course, be wrong to speak of hospitality today without mentioning the wedding banquet passage from Luke. Jesus often speaks of hospitality, of how we are welcoming one another in the world. In this passage, he seems to be making two major points that we need to bear in mind in our year of hospitality.

First, he focuses on our role as guests. We should always be humble guests, guests who know that we are not the most important people in the world, that everything does not revolve around us. This awareness of our own reality, as one among that vast multitude of God’s beloved creatures, not only helps avoid the embarrassment Jesus speaks of, but also helps us to be more fully aware of others, their needs, their desires, their importance.

Second, he focuses on our role as hosts. Our hospitality is a reflection of divine hospitality. As God loves everyone and invites everyone into the Kingdom, so are we meant to be open, generous and welcoming to everyone – especially to all the people who may not often find welcome.

It is my hope that during the course of this Year of Hospitality we will not only find many ways to make our community more welcoming to everyone and our parish more a center of welcome in Tigard, but also find ourselves all becoming more welcoming presences wherever we are in our day-to-day lives.

The reading from Hebrews begins, "Let mutual love continue." Indeed – let it continue and grow and thrive among us, so that everyone we encounter may know themselves welcome in the world as they are touched by the all-embracing love of God.

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The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 18 July 2010

Today's collect is reminiscent of the Collect for Purity, that beautiful prayer with which Anglican Eucharists have customarily begun, in that it acknowledges that there is nothing about us that God does not know, and, based on that fact, asks that God in his mercy give us what God alone knows we need. In the Collect for Purity we ask that God, knowing our limitations, enable us to worship worthily. But in today's collect we cast a broader net, asking God to give us all the things we truly need, because only God knows what they are.

That is the basis of our relationship with God: that God does indeed have compassion on our ignorance and weakness, on all our mortal shortcomings, and generously gives us what we need. It is not up to us to earn the gift of life – or redemption – or hope – or whatever. It is a free gift, flowing out from the Love which is God.

And we in turn are called to give of ourselves to everyone else, mirroring God's infinite generosity. Today we have read two of the most painted stories in all of scripture: the angels visiting Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre, and Mary and Martha welcoming Jesus to their home at Bethany. I expect we all have particular paintings, etchings, or drawings that come immediately to mind.

The three at table at Mamre have come to symbolize the Holy Trinity itself. Copies of Rublëv's icon are in churches throughout the world, reminding us that God is infinitely gracious and welcoming, leaving a place for us at the table and inviting us to the feast. Mary and Martha have been portrayed over and over as archetypes of Christian life, and have given their names to countless guilds organized for all manner of service. Each story is filled with layers of possible meaning and interpretation. Let us look at them in terms of this particular collect.

Almighty God, the fountain of all wisdom, you know our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking: Have compassion on our weakness, and mercifully give us those things which for our unworthiness we dare not, and for our blindness we cannot ask; through the worthiness of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, ...

Abraham and Sarah have been wandering for many years, following God's call faithfully – and more than once wondering if what they were doing made any kind of sense, if the promises they thought were theirs were in fact real. They wondered and wandered and persevered. Sometimes Abraham did ask, did challenge God as to whether the land and offspring promised would ever be his. What did he and his wife need that God might provide? Connection, reassurance, a child. That is what these lovely messengers brought.

Abraham immediately responded with joy to the connection, to the opportunity to provide welcome. He hustled and he got Sarah to hustle – and they provided bountiful provisions for the visitors. They stepped aside from their own worries and doubts and gave themselves over to hospitality. And the scene ends with that remarkable reassurance that Sarah will indeed bear a child of her own, even though she is well past childbearing age, that in fact she will have the child within the year. Can you imagine their surprise? No wonder Sarah laughed. But this is God providing exactly what they need, whether they deserve it or not, whether they ask for it or not.

Now look at Mary and Martha. They and their brother Lazarus have been faithful followers of Jesus, listening, serving, striving to understand and to help and to do what he asks. Undoubtedly they have experienced confusion like everyone else, probably also anxiety, concern about what Jesus' fate will be, about what may happen to them – all sorts of internal turmoil. What do they need? Most of all they need Jesus with them – and here he is. Mary feels a need to sit at his feet, bask in his presence and absorb his teaching – and he lets her do this. Martha, on the other hand, feels the need to provide food for everyone, to show the kind of proper hospitality that Abraham and Sarah showed, and he lets her do that. They are both able to have the sort of relationship with God-come-among-us that they need in that moment. What they are not able to do is demand that other people do or be the same. When Martha complains about Mary, "Can't you see that I am doing all of this work while she is just sitting there? Can't you tell her to help me?" Jesus responds, in effect, "Leave Mary alone. She is doing what she needs to do."

So just as God meets our needs regardless of our worthiness or even our awareness, we are expected to give space to one another, to recognize that each of us has our own relationship with God, our own spiritual path. And we are meant to honor that, as God does.

Abraham and Sarah were ancient nomadic herders. Few of us can truly imagine what their lives were like, what they thought about on awaking or lying down to sleep in their tent. Surely they had worries about the survival of their livestock, the management of their servants and slaves, the finding of good water and grazing, that are beyond our

experience. Similarly, they could have no conception of the complexities of modern urban and suburban life, of plane travel or internet communication. We do, however, share a relationship with the Triune God who loves each of us just as he loved them, who knows our needs for assurance and connection as well as he knew theirs. What we share across the millennia is that call to trust the God who loves us enough to come to us in our need, to bless us beyond our imagining, perhaps with things we never thought to ask. And we share the call to act out of that same generosity ourselves, blessing all those we encounter.

Sometimes it is tempting to think that the overflowing generosity of God is reserved for a select few, for particular kinds of people. Merely looking at the list of observances for this week gives a glimpse of the 'wideness in God's mercy', the inclusiveness of God's love – and the effect it has in urging people on to lives of self-giving service. They are an extremely varied group.

We begin the week with Father Bartolomé de las Casas, who spent much of the first half of the 16th century in the Spanish colonies in the Americas. God granted him compassion and wisdom to recognize and champion the natural rights of the oppressed native populations. He had extraordinary learning and insight, as well as passion, which led to significant changes in Spanish policy. Then we go all the way back to the fourth century where the lovely and wealthy Macrina gave up family wealth and privilege and educated her remarkable brothers who became leaders of the church with a legacy affecting all who came after. Sharing the day with Macrina we now have the redoubtable Adelaide Case, first female professor at an Episcopal Seminary. Her challenges were exceptional in that pioneering position, but God granted her a faith that shone brightly for all to see, and inspired all who encountered her. Then on a single day we remember four powerful and stalwart leaders of change in nineteenth century America: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sojourner Truth, & Harriet Ross Tubman, women of extremely varied backgrounds whose encounters with God led them to be champions of the poor, the outcast, and the ignored. Then we come to our Saint of the Week, Albert John Luthuli, with his tireless work for fairness and justice in South Africa. These last five all endured serious persecution and danger, in which they were given the gift of hope by the God who knows what we need always. Then magnificent Mary Magdalen from whom Jesus cast our seven demons, meeting a need she had no way to articulate and inviting her into a whole new life.

The week concludes with Thomas á Kempis, whose life of devotion in the fifteenth century led to the writing of a little book that has been printed in more languages than any other outside the Bible. As God gave him the communal life of worship that he needed, he in turn gave inspiration to countless others.

Different countries, different languages, different centuries, different ethnicities, different struggles, different challenges, different gifts. Some rich, some abjectly poor; some men, some women; some private, some public; some scandalous, some decorous. No one of us would like all of them, or invite all of them to our houses. But God's love and concern knows no such limitations of personal taste and comfort. Each one faced disappointments and pain, moments of doubt and confusion, but God was with each one to provide what each needed to continue their spiritual journeys, their work with God in blessing the world.

We may or may not find ourselves bustling about like Abraham or Martha, when we see God's blessing coming into our lives, but, whatever our response, we will know ourselves loved and we will know that in the grand economy of God "all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." Amen.

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The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 28 August 2016

Thinking about today's readings altogether, the advice about never taking first place, about inviting the poor and needy, about entertaining strangers and caring for prisoners, about not being haughty – thinking about all of this together, we can gather a sense of a special attitude, a way of relating to the world, more than simple advice about where to sit at a fancy banquet, (assuming there are no place cards.)

The collect points to a whole way of living, a way in which our whole selves, body, mind, and spirit, are aligned with God, with the basic structure of creation, which the readings reveal to be hospitality.

Hospitality means welcome, sharing what we have and what we are with others. Hospitality means open doors, generosity, open hands offering friendship and inclusion.

Hospitality means never saying, "There is not enough for you." Hospitality means saying, "Come in, sit down, join us. We are glad you are here."

When the author of Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it," he is referring to the hospitality of Abraham under the oaks at Mamre, as they scrambled about their tents to provide bread and wine and meat for passing strangers – strangers who were seen in retrospect to be angels, messengers from God to assure them of the truth of God's promises, that despite all common sense they would soon have a child and begin the line which would generate progeny more numerous than the sands of the seashore or the stars in the sky.

When we think about hospitality, what it can mean in our lives here at Trinity and our lives in our neighborhoods and workplaces, it is useful to think about Abraham and Sarah. Let us imagine ourselves out in their hot and dusty world, traveling with camels and donkeys, sheep and goats, and assorted other animals, with relatives and herders and various slaves. It is a struggle to keep all of us fed and watered in this dry countryside, but we are managing well, with skill, determination, and trust in God, who led us out here, away from our comfortable home in Ur. Here we are at Mamre, where the oaks and terebinths indicate reliable water for us and our animals – and where two trade routes cross offering opportunity to trade for other necessities.

This is a good place to be, a place for rest and prayer. And here come some visitors. They seem to be on their own, without flocks or herds or a caravan of supplies. We would surely offer hospitality to anyone who came by, understanding that essential rule of nomadic people, that the stranger is welcomed to food and drink and shelter – because that is the only way human beings can survive in such an inhospitable environment.

There is water at Mamre, so that part is not hard. But any wine or grain we have has been carried a long way, is part of a precious store. Sarah grinds grain, builds a fire, mixes ingredients and cooks them some sort of bread or cake. The centerpiece of generous welcome tends to be the meat. So an animal is chosen from the herd, killed, drained of blood, butchered, and then cooked. This is a lot of work! And this is the hospitality they freely offered to these people they had never met, setting an example for all time of ‘showing hospitality to strangers and thus entertaining angels unaware.’

I believe that the world of desert nomads is a parable of life for people in all times and places. It tells us that we all need one another. We need the shelter of community, the nourishment of shared meals, shared life. Without hospitality we are each alone – and we were not created to live that way. We cannot have fullness of life without hospitality offered and received.

This is our understanding of reality. There are many traditions which say that the world is the domain of various beings, divine or demonic, which demand propitiation. Some even demand that we sacrifice other people in order to be safe, to continue in life. This was the religion of the Aztec and Maya, among many others. Some modern secular philosophies of life similarly speak about ‘us and them’, about our need to secure our place in the world at the expense of others. I remember vividly one of my students saying that he did not want to discuss programs to alleviate poverty, because “other people need to be poor, so that I can be rich.” These views, ancient and modern, posit a world in which we are not welcomed or embraced, but in which we need to claw our way to well-being.

But our faith reveals that we are welcome in the world. That the same God who loved it into existence loves us into existence, and wills for us life and joy. We are welcome here and are invited to share that welcome with others.

Hospitality, free, open, generous hospitality, is how we are most fully human, is how we are most truly living in the image of the God who is love. One could say that Hospitality is true religion, a fundamental attitude that says that you are welcome in my world, that it is our world. ‘Mi casa es su casa’ on a cosmic scale.

Think about the difference this makes in how we listen to people – to our children, our obnoxious neighbors, our infuriating political opponents, terrible drivers, incompetent store clerks. Hospitality says, “I am glad that you are here. I am glad that you are. What can I do to make your life better? What can I offer you?”

The Gospel points out that, while it is easy to be hospitable to the people we like to have in our world, true hospitality needs to include especially the people who have nothing to offer in return – a welcome that says, as God says, I am glad that you are. There is abundance of life in living generously with open hearts and open hands.

But it is not easy. It takes discipline, practice, intentionality.

Some people begin their discipline of hospitality by inviting strangers to join them at church, or in their pew, or at coffee hour – or by conscientious politeness to the most disagreeable people they encounter – or by sitting down and listening to what they have always considered the boring ramblings of a relative or neighbor. This discipline of behaving hospitably, welcoming people into our world, even when we would rather shut ourselves off, changes our hearts.

Another approach to growing in hospitality is from the inside out, starting with prayer. Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies, to include even the people who make us most uncomfortable. It is again a question of discipline. I can begin my work of hospitality by recalling the people I know I do not honestly welcome in my world, people who are cruel – or who ignore me – or who are unattractive – or who disagree with me – or who interfere with what I try to do – by calling those people into my mind when I settle down to pray.

This can be a challenging discipline, to invite these others into my prayer life, into that innermost place I share with God. In the Epistle we are admonished to remember prisoners as if prisoners ourselves. This is an interior hospitality which invites others, in all of their pain and difficulty, into our hearts and prayers. Again, welcome to my world. What can I do to help? What can I offer you? And again, growth happens and our behavior changes. I become better able to live out the hospitality I am practicing in my heart.

This thinking about hospitality was broadened for me this week by Thursday’s 100th anniversary of the National Park Service. Like so many of you, I grew up with a love of the National Parks, refuges begun in the later 19th century,

before ever there were rangers with funny hats to look after them. I have been inspired and brought to tears by Ken Burns' fabulous PBS series on the parks again and again. I invited students in my ethics classes into the struggles and disputes that characterized the early years of their development, especially the fierce controversy between John Muir, who found God in the wilderness and wanted to preserve everything as God had made it, and Gifford Pinchot, who advocated a modern notion of conservation that would maintain the lands for the benefit of all of society, so that their wonders could nourish and inspire and sustain everyone.

Controversy and mutual vilification are everywhere right now as they were in the early 20th century. No one seems to have the eloquence of John Muir or the exuberance of Teddy Roosevelt, but they have as much passion. And hospitality has something to say to this. Hospitality as a way of life is open to opposition and alien points of view, is willing to listen. To me it seems even more challenging to invite the person with views that repel me to sit down and converse than it would be to offer them my last food in the desert – but hospitality demands both.

As if this were not enough, the National Parks Service anniversary reminds us of the broadness of our hospitality as a way of living on this beautiful planet. When Ken Burns called the National Park system, 'America's Best Idea', he reminded us that this idea of setting land aside from personal control and development for the good of the whole of society has not only benefited us but has been taken up by other countries around the world. I have seen the extraordinary difference it is making in the development of Bhutan and we have all seen how it has enabled the possible survival of countless magnificent African species.

Hospitality includes not just people we meet, but all the people on our planet now and in the years to come. And it includes the other animals and plants and natural environments sharing it with us.

I believe that the saving of species from extinction is an essential expression of hospitality. The day after the Park Service anniversary I received an email from the Nature Conservancy telling of the successful campaign to bring the delightful island fox back from near extinction in a remarkably short time. This is a story of science and determination and generosity and hard work, in the service of hospitality toward these tiny 4-pound animals, fellow creatures of God.

The Nature Conservancy Director of Science Scott Morrison said, "... this project shows what can happen when people get together and just decide they're not going to let something special go extinct on their watch." Determined hospitality at work.

The Park Service anniversary reminds us of the great things that human beings can create even in the midst of heated controversy and intensely differing opinions.

Hospitality has implications for how we use power, what we grow in our backyards, how we drive, as well as how we serve the food we offer each day and how we include one another in worship. It is a whole way of living.

The reading from Hebrews begins, "Let mutual love continue." Indeed – let it continue and grow and thrive among us, so that everyone we encounter may know themselves welcome in the world, welcome in life – and especially welcome with us.

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The invisible parts:

suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us. (Paul showing how it all connects)

Jesus sends disciples out to heal people

anniversary of [the order](#), issued by [Major General Gordon Granger](#) on June 19, 1865, proclaiming freedom for slaves in [Texas](#).¹²

Emancipation Proclamation issued January 1, 1863 – Juneteenth = 2.5 years later. Surrender at Appomattox April 9, 1865 – so this is actually two months after that

Originating in [Galveston](#), Early celebrations consisted of [baseball](#), fishing, and rodeos. (wiki)

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