

Genesis 18:1-16 ~ Psalm 111
Day in Mamre; Night in Sodom Part 1:
What Was the Miracle of Mamre?
 August 19, 2018

Introduction to Text:

You have probably heard a lot about Abraham, you know “Father Abraham,” the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; but probably not so much about Lot, his nephew who went with him, from the word “go.” And you’ve probably heard about the angels who came to tell Abraham and Sarah the miraculous news that she *would* be having a baby, as promised, after all these years. I’ll bet you’ve heard about Sodom and Gomorrah and their dramatic destruction, but you may not have realized that these two events, these two “inscrutable intrusions” (Walter Brueggemann) by God happened on the same day, and the same very busy angels accomplished both of them.

These are intended to be twin stories, mirror images: Today’s story is bright, hot, personal, quiet. It speaks of beginnings, birth, and a miracle so bright we should have issued sunglasses for everyone at the door. Next week’s story is dark, fiery and loud. It is about endings and death, massive death, and tells the violent story of God’s judgment and destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Crash helmets and night goggles might be in order next week. *Both* stories amaze me in their ability to shimmer with power and truth about how God does ultimately fulfill God’s promise to bless and redeem us all. Today and next week we will look at each of these stories in turn.

Today, we begin with the “Miracle of Mamre.” I will lead us into this text by way of a story about our beloved Golden Retriever named “Daisy.” She was not the dark auburn kind of Golden Retriever you may be picturing. She was blond. Very blond. And true to her breed, extremely loveable and loving. One summer, our vacation and study leaves caused our home to be empty of her people for two long stretches, almost back to back. We had dog sitters to come feed and walk her. Young women she knows and loves. However, toward the end of the second two-week stretch, our dog sitters noticed that each day she got droopier and droopier. Daisy actually started to cry (in the way that dogs do) when she got ready to leave the house the last few days of our absence. She said it seemed as if Daisy had decided that this was simply how her life was going to be from this time forward, so she was settling in. “Oh, well. This is my life now. Just really boring, long, lonely days, but hey, better get used to it. This is my new normal. Time to settle in for the long haul.”

It’s hard to imagine the thoughts inside of Abraham that day in Mamre, now 100 years old and Sarah, 90 years old. It was twenty-five *long* years since God had called them forth from Haran to make of them a great nation, through which all families would be blessed. God had promised them offspring as numerous as the stars— but in reality, since Sarah had not been able to have a child, they decided to have a surrogate son born to their servant, Hagar. Ishmael, son of Hagar and Abraham, seemed to be the one. Abram had his son, they were more or less set.

Sarah's barrenness was her eternal condition, as you can imagine at the age of 90, "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women," indeed her childbearing years were long over. So I'm guessing, their state of mind may have been a little like our dog, Daisy. This is it. Settle in, we didn't quite get the message right.

But on that bright, sunny day, when our story takes place, everything changes. Not dramatically or loudly. There is actually a lot of silence in this story. At the same time, our narrator provides vivid detail, zooming in the camera so close we can see the scene, we can smell the bread, and we can even hear the inner thoughts of Sarah. I invite you to follow the reading along in your bulletin, as we take a moment to observe together the turns of this marvelously told tale. Then we will look between the lines to discover the miracle of Mamre for the people of Israel, and for all of us here today.

The first verse sets the scene and the mood, vividly. "The Lord appeared to Abraham." The narrator wants us to know from the word "go" that a divine visitation to Abraham is about to happen. But Abraham does not know this, yet. "By the oaks of Mamre" is also a signal: God has spoken to Abraham under Oak trees before. Next we are told what time: "in the heat of the day." What's important about that? The light is bright literally, but here is also signal that we are about to see God in action, God in the midst of our lives, God in the heat of the action. For Abraham in the actual story, he's sitting near the entrance of his tent, trying to get a little relief from the blazing heat. I picture him half awake, half asleep when the men appear.

What does he do when he sees these three men? He doesn't call his wife Sarah or one of their servants to go answer the door. He "ran" over to them, and "bowed to the ground" and then begged them to stay for resting, bathing, and food. They readily agree, and Abraham literally jumps into action, running and ordering Sarah and a servant to bring out their best: yeast bread (not just unleavened bread) and a prize calf (not just some old cow they were planning to slaughter anyway) and told both Sarah and the servant to fly into action on the double. I get out of breath just reading this part of the story. All this activity in the heat of the day: running, kneading, slaughtering, milking, roasting, serving, eating. But all the while, there is no talking, beyond the arranging of this hospitality until they have taken their meal, with Abraham not joining them in the feast, but standing by. The narrator wants us to notice this extraordinary display of hospitality, even by Bedouin culture standards of the day.

After they have eaten comes the one question the visitors initiate, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" The moment has come for the announcement, the reason for their heat of the day, under the oaks, mystical visitation—here it is: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son." At this shocking, preposterous declaration, Sarah laughs to herself, except we all hear it and so do the visitors. We'll never know what all went on in Sarah's mind that caused her to spontaneously laugh to herself. But the visitors respond with the question that still takes my breath away with its possibility and its promise: *"Is anything too wonderful*

for the Lord?" The answer of course is "no" – nothing is too wonderful or too hard for God. And we, on this side of Easter, know what Sarah could not: this is the first of a series of impossible births that would bring forth the continuation of God's promise, culminating with Mary giving birth to Jesus.

But for now, Sarah gets embarrassed and defensive saying "I didn't laugh." And the visitors, stepping out of the role of gracious guests retorted: "Oh yes, you did laugh." This story ends as it began, laced with lavish hospitality from the beginning when Abraham jumps up to greet them, to the end as we are told Abraham walks the visitors down the road, pointing them on their way toward Sodom.

So, what *was* the miracle of Mamre? The immediate story line miracle of course, was the birth of Isaac, whose name means "to laugh." For those of you currently in the business of raising grandchildren, perhaps Abraham and Sarah *actually raising* the infant, toddler, and young boy Isaac at the age of 90 and 100 was an even bigger miracle than the birth itself. Yet here's the largest miracle, the one that can make us laugh sometimes with disbelief, sometimes with irony. Especially when it seems like we're out of options and doors keep closing. Especially when we've given up all hope and hunkered down no longer expecting breakthroughs as we might have when we were younger. The miracle of Mamre is this: *Nothing is too wonderful or too impossible for God to accomplish.*

OK, great. But what does this really mean for us, today? How can the Miracle of Mamre shine light and hope on burdens weighing heavily on us right now? How can the Miracle of Mamre point the way forward for hard decisions we are facing today? First, I want to be clear about what this miracle doesn't mean.

This doesn't mean that God will give us whatever we want, whenever we ask for it. God's timing, God's ways are not our ways. We know that, of course. But this story is a perfect check on that fantasy. God is not Santa Claus, nor a divine ATM machine. And rarely does God do things according to our timetable. Have you ever noticed that? God will do the impossible to bring about God's divine purposes through us. That is something quite different than getting everything we think we want.

Nor does this mean that once we are given the big and wonderful life changing gift—such as the woman of our dreams, the job of a lifetime, the second chance we never thought we'd get—that we will live happily ever after. Let's be honest: that only happens in the movies and in fairy tales. The story of Abraham and Sarah is a prime example. When Isaac is only a young boy, God demands that Abraham take this miracle baby, to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering. What? Nobody is laughing in that story. That is another story for another sermon, or ten sermons. Life definitely did not all of a sudden fall into place for Abraham and Sarah after the Miracle of Mamre. That is not how a "Mamre miracle" works.

It does mean that God will stay with us, work with us and through us in spite of our imperfections and missteps. Even in this very ancient story, we see real people with real problems. Abraham and Sarah were not perfect. Yes, they went when God said, "Go." But they didn't go exactly how and where God intended them to. They got scared, defensive and impatient. Sarah was mean to Hagar. And Abraham got overwhelmed by the contentious women in his house. And God stayed with them, worked with them and through them, bringing new life from death, again and again.

It does mean that God can and will deliver Mamre Miracles in our lives, even in the heat of the day, when we least expect it, even despite *our* less than faithful decisions and missteps. I believe this holds true for us in our individual lives and for us as a society. As we lament the current threats to truth in public discourse, to the integrity of our election system, and the increasing inequalities between God's children, I pray this story rekindles our hope and faith in our Easter God. Our God who brings life out of death. *This is where we come in. It also means* that we are called to shine with the light of the Mamre miracle, in our own lives and in our life together as a faith community called FPC. The "too wonderful" must come from us, through us. God is waiting.

Bob and I did, eventually come home. Our dog Daisy's happy life resumed, just when she appeared to have given up all hope. But what about you and me? What is weighing on your heart this morning? Are you confused by God's timing, or God's apparent silence? Have things not turned out the way you hoped or expected? Maybe your relationship with God, with Christ has hardened down into a predictable pattern that yields little joy, fulfillment, or challenge.

Take a page from Abraham's book. Be ready to entertain strangers and strange ideas when they appear before you. Strange new possibilities that perhaps have never occurred to you before, could be a message from God. Notice the people and situations God places in your life, both with strangers and with the people you know best. They can surprise you, too. Do what you can to be more hospitable to God, in whatever form God may choose to appear to you. A new beginning may be just around the corner.