

“Sensing Presence and Trusting in Presents”
based on Gen. 18:1-15, David Jahnke, 7/18/10

I hope that cynicism is not regaining a foothold in my life as the years go by. I spoke last week of my passing by the homeless during my trip to Chicago. But as I read about Abraham receiving divine visitors, I remembered a similar visit in my first year of seminary— a more idealistic time in my life; a time of burgeoning faith when I gladly welcomed a homeless man.

I noticed him coming to the little-used back entryway of my dormitory. It had a little arcade above so it was shaded. As you can guess, it gets a little hot in Austin TX so he would bring his bags up from the park to rest and cool off. I met and talked with him only a few times. One time I brought him a cold drink and learned that he liked to read so I gave him a book or two. On another rainy day, I invited him in for coffee and to dry off.

I learned that he was a Vietnam War veteran who had been beaten down by life after the tragedy of war and its traumatic effects upon his psyche. But he was not bitter. He was calm and friendly and he spoke of being thankful for all the little things in life. He savored the coffee and smiled gratefully as he ate and washed up.

This and other experiences like this over about a five year period led to a blossoming of hope in my life. The gratitude of the downtrodden penetrates everything within and without which seeks to drag us down and make us cynical; their gratitude strikes at the heart of life’s meaning. And remember that life has been very hard like this for almost all people throughout 99% of human history and still is in many places. So to see joy and gratitude from brothers and sisters whose life is so much harder than mine convicts me and leads us to count our blessings and share them and be grateful every day.

But Abraham’s wife Sarah seems to have let bitterness take hold. She had been blessed with wealth but she was infertile. And in her world, to be infertile as a woman was to be less than complete. Thanks be to God, we now know that is not true. And that infertility or celibacy may be a gift from God.

But year after year went by...with Sarah surely lifting up prayers to this God who had called her husband into a new land and had promised him that his offspring would be more numerous than the stars above.

When Sarah's prayers were unanswered, she told Abraham to go sleep with a maidservant Hagar which he did and she conceived. This further embittered Sarah to the point of driving Hagar and her child out of her home.

Years and years passed to the point of her knowing she was too old to bear children. It was then that the Lord told first Abraham and then Sarah that she would conceive and have a child. And understandably, they both laughed cynically at this prospect.

I wonder if there are things for which you have been hoping for yourself or a loved one for months or years— a job, a life partner, healing, newness of life, a return to joy, a change of heart or life. Perhaps you have grown somewhat cynical after years of unanswered prayers or prayers not answered as you had hoped.

During that five-year period of blossoming hope in my life, I kept expecting to find more cynicism in the hard-luck folk I met. Take the Vietnam Vet, for example-- after believing he was going to war to serve God and country and ending up in the mire of the Vietnamese jungle-- a mire which ended up stuck in his own head; after coming home to disappointment and spite; after our system did little for him and his psychological wounds....

And yet, like so many whom life might have embittered, he had an awareness of something beyond him; an awareness which led to appreciation; awareness that often leads the poor to an abundance that even the richest person who takes things for granted knows little about.

I see this awareness in Abraham who was out in the shade of his tent in the heat of the day. He was by the great oaks of Mamre, a holy place where he had built an altar to the Lord. As he rested in the quiet of this wilderness, he looked up and saw three men approaching. And, in them, he sensed the presence of the divine. He ran to them and bowed down before them. He pleaded with them to stop and rest and enjoy the shade, along with water and bread.

And after calling on others to help him prepare curds, cakes and a calf, he enjoyed all these simple things in the presence of the divine. And then he was promised that a boy would be born to his wife Sarah.

Even before the men arrived, I think Abraham was already offering himself fully to the heat of the moment as he sat on his porch. And this is where fullness of life begins. Saying “Here I am Lord” at every stage of the day; taking time out from the busy-ness to simply be and to be grateful for all the good things around us; and then gladly taking advantage of the opportunity to increase the joy and rest of others when opportunity arises, just as Abe did.

Abundant life is about gladly receiving all that life offers us and gladly offering all that we have to life. Then the truth of God’s promises comes alive. And this is not just a spiritual matter. Or rather the distinction between the spiritual and the material starts to fade as we realize the goodness of Spirit filling the world and the goodness of the world filling our spirits. After all, Abraham was not promised happiness but rather land, a great nation, descendants as numerous as the stars. Sarah was not promised simply peace of mind but a child which filled her deepest longing. God largely comes to us in the good stuff of this world. And God wants us to bear good stuff to the world...

But again, what if life is feeling more scarce than abundant and we are feeling more oppressed than fruitful? What if we are far from awareness of God’s presence and closer to cynicism and doubt? First of all start or keep praying.

I heard a song by the band the Tragically Hip the other day right shortly after praying for an illustration--

If from the outside
There's no demand for what you do
And inside there's an army waiting
For their marching orders from you

Come sit on my swing-seat
Come sit on my porch
After Ten at night, smoke a cigarette
only if you like, of course

You can cast your doubts
Turn em inside-out

Hang em upside-down
Til their art falls out
Let your heart all out (From "The Dark Canuck" by the Tragically Hip)

For all of us who are feeling oppressed by this economy or by our history or our present circumstance...If we feel no demand or appreciation from the outside for what we do or who we are...If there is an army of possibility on the inside just waiting for marching orders... May we find porches to sit on...May we find friends to enjoy the simple (and healthy) things with... friends to pour out our heart to...

May our doubts about our God, ourselves and our future be cast out...and hung upside down 'til the deceptive arts of cynicism and joylessness all fall out. Sit quietly every day or get out and walk among the great trees of this Garden State and wait upon God's marching orders...They will come in the form of opportunities to serve.

May we be porch-bearers to those feeling down and out, welcoming brothers and sisters and acquaintances and strangers to our homes, including our church home. And in pouring our hearts out to God and neighbor, may we come to know and feel that all our deepest hopes and dreams will be realized...in God's good time. Because nothing is too wonderful for the Lord

All this applies to the church as well. We need to cast out whatever doubts and cynicism we may be feeling about what God might do to and through us as a body because nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. And the truly great news from this text is that even when Sarah laughed cynically and then on top of that, denied that she had laughed, still God fulfilled his promises to her and to Abraham.

So even if we are cynical about news of what God might do and even if we deny our cynical laughter-- it can still be done. Be it our new food ministries, this week's brand new church camp, the possibility of running an Alpha program; be it the potential to enliven our worship; God wants to draw more people into the love of God...God wants to multiply our joy and our peace and will do so as we give ourselves over to him and trust in and receive his abundant presence and presents. To the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations. And God's people say...

