

“EXTRAORDINARY TIME”

a sermon on Genesis 18:1-15, Romans 5:1-8, and Matthew 9:35 – 10:8
June 18, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
Sumner, Mississippi

So, in the chapters between Genesis 12, where we are first introduced to Abraham (or, “Abram,” as he was known in those days), and our reading this the morning from Genesis 18, we learn that although God led Israel’s great patriarch and his family from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan, “flowing with milk and honey,” promising that he would be *blessed* there with land and descendants (and presumably, at a fairly young age), God didn’t really “come through” on the promise. Abraham and Sarah, by chapter 18, are in their *nineties*, and Abraham’s only child had been by Sarah’s servant, Hagar – with Sarah’s *blessing*, at least at first. Remember, these were the days before the “ten commandments” had been created, and when harems of wives and concubines were the norm, as they were, in fact, for Israel’s leaders even *after* Israel had the ten commandments.

And regarding Abraham’s son born to Hagar, an angel of the Lord proclaimed, “he shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall live at odds with all his kin.”

But the point is, Sarah was barren – which she took to be an act of God, or of God’s *absence*, really. And so she and Abraham had just resolved themselves to the reality that the young man, Ishmael, born to Abraham and Hagar, would be Abraham’s only heir, and that the grand, promised fulfillment, if it was to come at all, would have to come through him.

That is the background for today’s story from Genesis 18, which tells of a visit paid to Abraham and Sarah by three individuals obviously sent there by God. There was nothing *special* about the day they chose to make their visit. All we are told is that it is *hot*, like so many other days in that part of the world (or for that matter, in *ours*). Abraham is sitting under an oak tree near the entrance to the tent he called home. And when the visitors arrive, he responds in what eventually became the *custom* of Israel – with truly gracious hospitality. He first offered them a bit of bread, but before it was over, he sat them down to a *feast* of food and drink.

It’s not unlike a scene from an Andy Griffith show, or Huckleberry Finn, actually. Just ordinary people on a hot summer day, doing what any hospitable, gracious people would do when a stranger turns up on their doorstep.

Until God *intervenes*, and what was a very ordinary day becomes a truly *extraordinary* one – and what then follows became one of Israel’s most cherished ancient faith stories – one the people of Israel no doubt told around camp fires to their children for hundreds of years before they even *had* a written language to use, and put it in print. It is the story of how God blessed Abraham and Sarah with a child in their old age – long after “it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women” – and how when those “visitors,” whoever or whatever they were, predicted that would be the case, Sarah *laughed*.

And so, God kept the promise alive in those days, through Abraham and Sarah’s child, Isaac. Not the *mass* of land and descendants that were described in the grand promises of God, but a *start*.

And I love, in that story, the way writer so intentionally sets the scene as being a very regular, ordinary day into which God enters in a profound way, transforming it into a day that was written into the nation’s annals.

The truth be known, the same could be said about almost *everything* that happened in Jesus’ life and ministry. The Gospel story is the story of ordinary people, living ordinary lives, into which God intervened. Our reading this morning from Matthew’s Gospel gives that writer’s list of the Apostles. The list serves as a reminder that those twelve “chosen ones” were completely “unremarkable” people – not Israel’s priests, or leaders, but fishermen, a tax collector, a couple of sets of brothers of unknown origin. And all just living out their lives, apparently, providing for their families, making “ends meet,” until this man named *Jesus* showed up on the scene, and everything was turned upside down.

I don’t know if you are aware of it, but there are several different ways that various Christian traditions refer to the Sundays between Trinity Sunday, which we observed last week, and Christ the King Sunday, which comes in late November just before Advent. One way is to list how many weeks it has been since Pentecost Sunday, which is the more “traditional” Protestant way. In that case, this morning (as it is listed in the bulletin this morning) is the “Second Sunday after Pentecost.”

But another way is by picking up on the count of Sundays which aren’t directly related to either the Incarnation or the Redemption “cycles” of the church year which “anchor” the Christian calendar, if you will, and referring to those weeks as “Sundays in Ordinary Time.” By *that* reckoning, today is the “11th Sunday [of this liturgical year] in Ordinary Time” – the first Sundays of which came on the weeks after the Day of Epiphany, and before the beginning of Lent.

But we are now entering the *long* season of “Ordinary Time” – the weeks of summer and fall, the weeks when we attend to other pressing matters, and when

there aren't any significant "church celebrations" on the immediate horizon. And of course, in the case of this congregation, we won't even be gathering to *worship* together for a while.

Which, it seems to me, is therefore a good opportunity to point out that God's interventions into the "ordinariness" of life in Scripture rarely *if ever* occurred in the context of worship. Certainly, the psalmists and various other Biblical writers had a very "high view" of worship and its importance, but God's *interventions* into the lives of the faithful in the Scriptures happened in all sorts of places – in the market, in the home, by the sea, on the front porch, on the hillside.

In our reading, Jesus charges the Apostles to essentially do what *he* was doing in those days – go from town to town "proclaiming the Good news," *changing peoples' lives*, turning their ordinary days into *extraordinary* ones, by making God's presence known in tangible, life-giving ways.

Probably the best preserved example we have of Jesus turning the ordinary into the extraordinary is the Sacrament we will celebrate together shortly – in which ordinary elements of "sustenance" become for us the body and blood of Christ – "a means of grace, to those who believe," as our liturgy proclaims.

But it can happen anywhere, and at any time, if only we are *open* to it.

That's really the heart of the Gospel message – that when we are open to God's presence, God presents Himself in ways that transform "ordinary time" into "extraordinary time" – whether it's time at home, at the beach, in the garden, when we're alone, when we're with our families, *any* time.

My prayer for this congregation is certainly that when we gather together, our time will be extraordinary – and that as we come to our Lord's table, we find there more than simple bread and juice.

But it is also that we will all experience God's presence, and God's voice, at *other* times and places, and that those experiences will sustain us, renew us, and bring us peace.

To God be the glory.