

Sermon for July 31, 2016
"Dealing with God"

Genesis 18:16-32

One day Abraham was sitting under the shade of a tree in the middle of the day. He was watching as his many servants herded his sheep and tended to his flocks. Sarah was in the tent supervising the preparation of the food for the noon meal. Then Abraham looked up and saw three men, strangers, walking toward the camp. It is not often that we see people out in the wilderness wandering around. Where would they eat?

So Abraham ran to them and begged them to stop and have something to eat. "Come have a sandwich and something to drink." At first they said they would go on but Abraham insisted so they stopped. Abraham motioned for a servant, "quick tell Sarah to prepare a feast for these men." So Sarah went to work. Before long the servants came out with fried chicken and fresh tomatoes and mashed potatoes and green beans and large glasses of sweet tea with ice cubes!

As the three men ate, Abraham entertained them with tales of his many travels. When the dinner was finished and the men were refreshed and ready to continue their journey they thanked their hosts. Then the leader of the three said, "Where is your wife Sarah?" Funny, but Abraham didn't remember mentioning Sarah's name, maybe one of the servants did. Abraham said, "There in the tent." So the stranger said, "I will travel back in this area next year and by then she will have borne you a son!" The stranger meant well. Maybe he assumed old man Abraham had a young wife named Sarah. Sarah, listening from just inside the flap of the tent snickering at the stranger's folly. Her, have a baby at her age?!

Then the stranger said, "Why are you laughing? Is nothing too wonderful for the Lord?" Then Sarah realized her mistake! This was not a stranger. This was God! Instinctively she denied it, "I did not laugh." But God said, "Yes, you did! Gotchya!" And they all had a good laugh.

As they left, Abraham, as a good host, saw them on their way. As they walked along God thought, "I really should let Abraham know what's going on. His descendants will be a people that will be a blessing to the nations. They need to learn from his experience." So God stopped and said to Abraham, "I have heard about the evil of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and am on my way to destroy them." Abraham thought about this and he said, "Lord, not that I am questioning you or anything, but what if there are 50 righteous people in those cities. You wouldn't destroy the righteous with the unrighteous would you?" I imagine God smiled a little and said, "No, for the sake of the 50 I would spare the cities."

Then Abraham went on, "Lord, please be patient with your humble servants but what if there we only 45? You wouldn't destroy the 45 righteous just because the cities 5 short of 50 would you?" God said, "No, for the sake of the 45 I would not destroy them." Then Abraham bowed his head and said, "What if there's only 40?" "If only forty, I will spare the cities," God replied. Then Abraham said, "What if there's only 35?" God said, "For 35 I will spare them." Then they said the same for 30 and 20.

Finally Abraham said, "Please don't be angry, but what if there are only 10?" God sighed and said, "For 10 I will spare them." Then God left, and Abraham found he had nothing left to say.

Okay, so what do we make of this story of Abraham bargaining with God? It sounds like something you might expect to hear in a marketplace. "You are asking 50 pieces of silver for that rug. What if I only had 45 pieces of silver would you still sell it to me?" "For 45 pieces of silver I would sell it to you." "But what about 40 pieces? It is only 5 pieces of silver different; not much." "Okay for 40 I would still make the deal." And it goes on and on back and forth. But this is no marketplace and this is not rug salesman. This is God Almighty and they are bargaining over lives.

I think it is important to notice that God could have stopped the conversation at any point and God is the one who initiates it to begin with. It starts with God thinking "Shouldn't I share with Abraham that I am about to destroy these cities." And God decides to share because Abraham's

descendants will be a great nation that will be a blessing to the nations. This disclosure raises a moral dilemma in the mind of Abraham. He knew God as the one who had blessed him, and even sat down in the heat of the day and broke bread with him. God is the one who made his wife laugh for joy. This is a good and gracious and loving God. Would God destroy the righteous with the unrighteous?

So this moral dilemma is the basis of his dialogue with God. What is God's arithmetic when it comes the lives of the righteous and the unrighteous? How much "collateral damage" is acceptable when God brings judgment? "If there are 5 less righteous would you still destroy the righteous with the unrighteous?" If God is both gracious and just, what is the balance?

Basically Abraham is striving to understand God, and at the same time to plead for the lives of people he knew and who he had defended and even liberated in the past. Some would condemn Abraham for questioning God. But in the story, God seems to invite this questioning. Abraham is a man who sits down with God for dinner. He walks with God and God has chosen him to be the father of a great nation. And the purpose of his choosing is so that Abraham's descendants can be a blessing to the nations.

I would argue that this bargaining with God is a demonstration of the maturity of Abraham's faith. The rabbis who reflected on this story said that Abraham's faith was greater than Noah's because when God said to Noah, "I will flood the earth, go build an ark," Noah simply built an ark without questions about those who would die in the flood. On the other hand when God said "I will destroy those cities," Abraham said, "What about the innocent?" Abraham is struggling to understand the nature of God. But at the same time he is striving to act like God.

Here Abraham is attempting to live out the love and grace of God in the way he knows best. He is also, I believe, struggling to understand God. God said, "I will destroy those cities." Abraham thinks, "What about the innocent people there?" So Abraham in respect and in faith asks, "Lord, what if there are 50 innocent people there?" And in love he bargains God down to 10. This, I believe, is a lesson in mature faith initiated by God.

After dinner God and Abraham were talking and God says "I am going to destroy those cities?" Wait a minute? Doesn't that bother you? The notion that God goes around destroying cities full of people? What about the innocent, the children? If it doesn't bother you, it should!

It bothered Abraham. It bothers me. I know God as the one who in Jesus, came into the world to die in my place. As the one who said of those who nailed him to the cross "Forgive them for they don't know what they are doing."

Abraham shows us that it is the truly mature in faith who wrestle with these things. God is both a God of justice and a God of grace. God is standing with the oppressed in opposition to the oppressor. But God's son died so that both the oppressed and oppressor could be saved. It is right for God's people to ask of our Lord, "Will you destroy the righteous along with the unrighteous?" To raise that questions shows maturity. Perhaps God is inviting us to ask such questions.

The other thing we learn is to bargain for the lives of others. Maybe this can be a model for us as we try to live out Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. I had a church member who wanted to take to heart Jesus' teaching to pray for his enemies. But he came to me as his preacher because he was not sure exactly how to pray for them. He said, "Preacher, when I pray for my enemies, should I be praying for a quick death or a slow death?"

Somehow I don't think that is what Jesus meant. He meant we should be praying for them. Maybe praying that they would see the error of their ways and repent. Maybe we can pray to understand them better so we can figure out what their problem is anyway. Maybe in the process we can learn to love them. Maybe we can even bargain with God for their salvation.

Who should we be bargaining for in this world? What are the centers who evil and injustice in our world. Who are your enemies? God is a God of great grace and love. After dinner today have a talk with God, and try bargaining for their lives!