

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA

The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge

Church Year A

June 18, 2017 Pentecost 2

Genesis 18:1-18 21:1-7 • Matthew 9:35-10: 8-23

What do you think of when you think of God? What picture or image comes to mind when you try to imagine God? When I was a boy, I imagined God as being an old bearded white man, with a crown on his head, sitting on a big throne which was sitting on a cloud which was, at the same time, way out there somewhere but also uncomfortably close to my bedroom. Unlike my grandfather who was about the same age as God, God didn't appear to have a very comfortable lap to sit on. In fact, God looked more like Santa Claus, you know, with the long white beard? Both of them deciding who was naughty and who was nice.

As I've gotten older, and I hope maybe a little more grown up about who and what God is, I've come to realize who my childhood image of God really looks like. Zeus!! You know, sitting up there on top of Mt. Olympus, peering inside the bedrooms of human beings, arbitrarily manipulating them, and casting lightning bolts on their heads when he got ticked off. Or really just for the sport of it. Zeus. Sounds a lot like the Latin word for God. Deus.

Be honest now. At some point in your life, hasn't that been your image of God? Some combination of Zeus and Santa Claus? An arbitrary judge who hands out presents or punishments depending on how you behave?

That image of God even appears in art. Just think about Michelangelo's sublime painting of the Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. That Karen reminded us of in her sermon last week. The big, white guy with the beard reaching his finger out to touch Adam's finger and bring Adam to life. It's in many ways a lovely image reminding us of the divine energy that quickens our lives, but it also perpetuates the stereotype of God as a bearded old man.

All of this is a pretty far cry from the God we actually meet in Scripture. Like, we hear lots of references to God as Lord of Heaven and Earth or King of Heaven and that sort of thing. It's human writers creating metaphors to describe God in all of God's awesome might. What theologians would call God's Sovereignty.

But when God actually shows up in the Bible, as God seems to do with actually some regularity in the Hebrew Scriptures in particular, we get another image. Like this morning, when we look in on old Abraham meeting God under the oaks at Mamre.

Three dusty strangers show up at the door to Abraham's tent. Now, he doesn't immediately recognize who this might be, but that doesn't stop him from extending lavish hospitality. He bows low, brings water to wash their feet, asks his wife, Sarah, to prepare the hors d'oeuvres and then has his servant prepare a very elaborate meal.

And then the three men ask a strange question. “Where is your wife Sarah?” It helps here to know the backstory from the beginning of their journey, God has been promising the childless Abraham and Sarah a son. It hasn’t happened yet, and they have really begun to lose hope. In different ways, God has been communicating to Abraham to just hang in there. It’s going to happen. Have faith and be patient. Now, these three strangers show up. And the next thing we know one of them says, “I shall surely return to you in due season, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son.” And post-menopausal Sarah hears this and laughs. Now one of the strangers then reveals himself to be “the Lord” and says, “Why all the laughter? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?”

Now fast forward a year. Sarah has had a son, as promised. It’s Isaac—Isaac who’s known as The Son of Laughter. And Sarah says, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

What a brilliant story. And about a beautiful way to think about God. Not as an old white guy with a long white beard. But three dusty travelers in need of shelter and refreshment. In need of a little hospitality. In Christian literature these three are often seen as the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And Karen preached a really fine Trinity Sunday sermon last week which brought this story into the conversation about the Trinity. And I really believe that yes, these three travelers, who turn out to be God, tell us something profound about the Trinitarian God, and that is that God is relational. God is to be seen, heard, understood, known and experienced in relationships and as a relationship. Remember in John’s Gospel we hear Jesus describe what we think of as Heaven as that expansive place, the many dwelling places in the Father’s house, as being the relationship between Jesus and the Father. And it is in that expansiveness of that relationship that there is room for everyone. And then in the First Epistle of John, he tells us “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” What is Love other than relationship, right? God is Love and Love is only known in relationship.

Now here’s another take-away from our story this morning, a story that shows us the relational God. It’s in the Abraham and Sarah’s totally unselfish hospitality to these complete strangers that they come to know God. Their hospitality reveals God’s presence. And then God comes into the middle of their anxious longing, listens to their deepest need, and then — laughter. Laughter! Don’t you love that? So what God does in their lives is so improbable and unlikely that the only response can be laughter.

Later on in Matthew’s Gospel we’re going to hear Jesus say that whenever we feed hungry people or give a thirsty person a drink or visit someone who’s sick, or visit someone who’s in prison, it’s as if we are feeding or visiting him, Christ himself. It’s in our hospitality and it’s in our relationships, in other words, that we will see the face of God.

So in cultivating loving, healthy, mutually sustaining relationships, we can meet the face of God. We can see God at work in the world in the midst of these relationships. We can even

see God at work in the midst of difficult relationships. The hard ones. The ones that involve people who may not be easy to like. And of course it helps to remember that from time to time, we may not be so easy to like ourselves.

Karen said something else last week that speaks to this. You remember she said she tries to begin every conversation “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”. Beautiful. Particularly the difficult conversations. The hard conversations.

When we speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit, it’s as if we are joining with old Father Abraham in welcoming those three dusty travelers under the oaks at Mamre. When we speak hospitality and generosity we are welcoming God. When we speak hospitality and generosity we are joining the divine dance, the divine conversation, among Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So send the old white guy with the beard and the lightning bolts back to Greek mythology. Put the guy who’s always trying to figure out who’s naughty and who’s nice under the Christmas tree. Let those guys go and step into the divine flow, dive into the river of Love. Immerse yourself in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen