

## 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; Matthew 9:35—10:23; Romans 5:1-8.**

**Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7** deals with the promise of the birth of Isaac (18:1-15) and the account of his actual birth (21:1-7). The story begins, “The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day” (18:1). But God appears in the shape of three men as Abraham “looked up and saw three men standing near him” (vs. 2). Recognizing them as strangers, Abraham acted to extend full Near Eastern hospitality to them. He ran to them, invited them to rest and to refresh themselves with food and drink. He then hurries to his servants to ask them to quickly prepare the finest meal, including “a calf, tender and good”. Meanwhile, he gives them drink and has them rest in the shade of the oaks of Mamre, so they could enjoy the cooling breezes while waiting for their meal to be prepared. Then Abraham sets a bounteous meal in front of them and does not join them, but rather stands by them as an attentive host, ready to respond to their slightest request (vss. 3-8).

Hospitality was of prime importance in the biblical Near East. It was almost a sacred duty to entertain a stranger as a most welcomed guest, for in doing so, one never knew whether one might be “entertaining angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2). In such a harsh and demanding environment and where there were very few inns, travelers were always dependent upon the hospitality of strangers, so one was to treat kindly a visitor as a sacred trust for you might be equally in need yourself some day.

The traveler who happened upon your camp or home was to be treated with respect and honor, and was to be provided both a most bountiful meal and drink, adequate care for his animals, was to be given rest and even water to wash the dust from his feet. Even if one were an enemy, he was to be provided such hospitality, and in turn he was required not to attack his host for at least three days (the amount of time it would take for the sustenance provided by the donated meal to pass through the guest). That was what was so shocking to any Near Eastern reader when they read of Judas betraying Jesus after having taken supper with him; it was a breach of the most sacred honor. In fact, a stranger welcomed into a home required greater protection than ought to be given to the members of one’s own household, for it would be better for family members to be killed than for a visitor attacked who was under the protection of your home (Genesis 19:8). This is why, in this story, Abraham rushes to provide the greatest rest, refreshment, shade and a meal that he would not consider preparing for himself.

But these were no ordinary guests. These strangers were indeed “angels unawares”. Although these travelers seem to be ordinary people in a portion of the narrative (vss. 16, 22), in verses 1 and 13 one of them is identified as Yahweh – God in the flesh! And as was customary when strangers were so well entertained, they were expected to speak a blessing upon the hospitable household. But what a blessing is given to Abraham and Sarah!

The blessing is spoken presumably by God. “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son” (18:10). This was both Abraham and Sarah’s greatest wish – to have a son. But it seemed like a futile hope because, the text tells us, “Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women” (vs. 11). Both Abraham and Sarah were past the age of procreation, and Sarah no longer was menstruating.

Therefore, it seemed impossible for them to have a child that would continue the line of Abraham. Yet here, in the persons of visitors who were bringing a blessing to Abraham's household after having been treated with hospitality, was God making what seemed like an impossible promise. How would Abraham and Sarah respond to this promise?

Sarah laughed! She laughed at the absurdity of this promise. The course of the story at this point is intriguing. "So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh'" (vss. 12-15).

Sarah laughed at the declaration that she would become pregnant and bear a son. The laugh was not in glee or in joy, but at the sheer incongruity of the blessing. Such a thing was too ridiculous to Sarah to take seriously. In her opinion, she could no longer experience the "pleasure" or fulfillment of giving birth. The Hebrew word translated "pleasure" means "fertility" as well as "delight"; in fact, it is the word from which the name Eden is derived. As Eden is the symbol of God's fecundity in God's creation of the heavens and the earth, so this "Eden" is the symbol of Sarah's fecundity in bearing the future patriarch that will make the creation of the nation of Israel possible. God's fecundity leads to the creation of creation. Sarah's fecundity leads to the creation of that nation "in which all peoples of the earth will be blessed". Thus, both bring delight and pleasure to both God and humanity!

So Sarah laughs at the preposterousness of the idea. But God will not let Sarah's response become the order of the day! He will not let it stand! God forcefully rebuts Sarah's doubt. And God rebuts by asking, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?"

This sets the argument on an entirely different plane. Heretofore, the issue has been shaped around nature: if a woman is past childbearing and her consort past procreation, how is pregnancy and birth possible? But God changes the issue from nature to God's power, and therefore to history. The question is not whether such a birth is naturally possible. The question is, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" Is anything too hard, too impossible, too incredulous for God? You can't fashion situations that God can't change. And therefore barrenness or inability to procreate is something that God can choose to reverse!

The issue the author of this narrative is seeking to address is the steadfastness of God's intentions for humanity. God has a plan for the transformation of the world, and that plan is to be worked through Israel – a nation that is not chosen by God "because you were more numerous than any other people, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7). Israel was chosen by God to be God's means for the liberation of the world precisely because they were a weak and powerless nation. And they were so chosen because God could most clearly demonstrate God's capacity and intentionality to use them. It wasn't because of their human strength or ingenuity or political power or wealth that this nation was to change the world, but because of God's intentions, power and design. So it would be that God would begin the process of creating and molding this nation by making their very origins a miracle. For they were not born because of the strength, virility

and natural fecundity of their fore parents, but because of the direct intervention of God. “Is nothing too wonderful for the Lord?”

Sarah seeks to deny her laughter, for she immediately perceives that such laughter is a sign of her doubt that God would so work. But God will not let her get away with such denial. He replied to her denial, “Oh yes, you did laugh”. Even at the promise of conception, it will be by God’s action, not hers, for as a human she will deny the power and intentionality of God, not only for her, but for the human race.

Thus, the story ends, “The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old; as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age” (21:1-7)! Earlier, Sarah’s laughter had been that of disbelief and incredulity. Now it is a laughter of joy, for she had borne Isaac whose name means “He laughs”! Now Sarah and Abraham laughed because she had borne a child of laughter. So it was that God had had the last laugh!

**Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19** is a hymn of praise to God in which the Psalmist offers thanksgiving to God for recovery from a near-fatal illness. It begins with the most personal statement imaginable.

“I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplication. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live” (vss. 1-2).

There is no expression of love of God for the sake of love of God. Gratitude to God is most unabashedly based on what God can do (and has done) for this hymn writer. God “heard my voice and my supplication” and “inclined his ear to me”. The psalmist cried, “O Lord, I pray, save my life” (vs. 4), and God did so! Therefore, this writer will praise and love God. It is a purely responsive theology – God did good to me when I most needed it; now I will do good to him by praising him.

But although the psalm begins on such a pragmatic note, it eventually moves beyond that to a more grateful and far more eloquent act of praise.

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones. Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You have loosed my bonds. I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the Lord!” (vss. 12-19)

The setting for this portion of the psalm (and, perhaps, the entire psalm) is that of the formal thanksgiving offering of Israelite worship (Leviticus 6:11-21; cf. King Hezekiah's prayer in Isa. 38:10-20). The thanksgiving offering (also called "the offering of well-being") was to be offered after recovery from a severe illness. It consisted of two parts. The first was an act of worship, performed in the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. vs. 18-19) "in the presence of all his people". The priest was to offer both a burnt offering to God and a meal offering made into cakes (like a pancake). The second part of the thanksgiving offering was a celebratory banquet with one's family and friends, in which a toast was made to God ("I will lift up the cup of salvation" – vs. 13) and consume together the burnt offering. The banquet could last as long as two days, according to the Torah, but on the third day, any remaining part of the carcass of the burnt offering was to be destroyed by burning it to a crisp.

It is clear that what is being described in Psalm 116 is the thanksgiving offering, both in the grateful worship of God and in the celebration of the Psalmist's friends over his recovery. This Psalm reminds us of the Eucharistic nature of the Hebrew thanksgiving festival, as we "raise the cup" to God, break the sacrificial bread and consume the flesh of the One broken for us! By so doing, we witness that we, too, have been delivered from the deepest of spiritual death, but that we are delivered to submit our bodies as a thanksgiving sacrifice for our Lord (I Cor. 11).

**Matthew 9:35—10:23** deals with both Jesus' ministry and the ministry his followers inherit from him. Matthew 9:35-38 is a synopsis of Jesus' ministry. As such, it deals with three topics: the work of Jesus, the heart of Jesus and the call of Jesus.

"Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest'" (9:35-38).

First, Matthew summarizes the work of Jesus. He had been "curing every disease and every sickness". He had been teaching "and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom". He had been calling people like Matthew to follow him. He had been identifying with "tax collectors and sinners" and with the common people. And because of both his defense of the people and his offence against Israel's political, economic and religious leaders, he had received the censure and criticism of Israel's powerful elite. Thus, through the work of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven (the shalom community) was being lived out and practiced before the very eyes of all Israel.

Second, the heart of Jesus is particularly exposed in this passage, which especially focuses on Jesus' love. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:36). It is intriguing that Matthew uses the words "harassed" and "helpless" to describe the people. It is not simply that they are being dominated or oppressed. They are being exhausted and fatigued by being constantly worried and tormented by those in power who are relentless in their exploitation of them. The word "harass" in Greek literally means "to set dogs on". This is how the Israelite peasants feel – as if they are being

relentlessly “set-upon” by their political, economic and religious leaders who are merciless in taking them for all that they can, so that the peasants become “helpless” and fatigued. And when Jesus saw that they were “like sheep without a shepherd”, being viciously attacked by political, economic and religious wolves, Jesus’ heart went out to them. He came to their defense, seeking to protect them by providing the kind of spiritual and socially-aware leadership that one such as Jesus could give them. But it is not only Jesus that is called to protect the flock from “the Powers that Be”, but also those who would follow and be disciplined by Jesus. And that brings us to this passage’s third point.

Third, the passage ends with the call of Jesus – not only his own call to lead the peasants to oppose the empire, but also the call he issues to those who would seriously follow him. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (9:37b-38).

But the passage doesn’t end there. Although it is artificially divided by chapter (the chapter divisions were added centuries after the writing of the text), 9:35-38 carries on to 10:1-23. Matthew moves from the mission of Jesus to the mission of those who follow him. This is expressed in a very intriguing use of words that Matthew makes. He begins chapter 10 by calling the followers of Jesus, “disciples” (10:1). But then when he names them, he calls them “apostles” (10:2). That change in nomenclature is significant, because this is the only place in his book that Matthew calls Jesus’ followers “apostles”. Whereas the word “disciple” means “student” or “one being taught”, the word “apostle” means “one being sent”. These “apostles” are the ones who, in ministering to those who are harassed and made helpless by the Powers that Be, are to go out to the harassed and both comfort them and harass their harassers. Like Jesus, they are to proclaim the truth of systems acting oppressively rather than justly, acting greedily rather than equitably sharing wealth, acting to dominate and control rather than to be in trusting relationships with each other and God. They are to proclaim God’s empire and cure every disease (9:35), raise the dead (9:18-26), cleanse lepers (8:1-4), exorcise from society the elite’s demons of greed, domination and lust for power (9:22-24). Jesus’ call to mission is to become the apostles’ call to mission. His work is to become their work.

But not only does his work become their work. His heart for the poor and powerless should become their heart, as well. And his calling should become their calling also. In Matthew 10:5-23, Jesus presents four aspects of the apostolic mission. First is its area. It is to start small and become world-straddling (10:5-6). The apostles are initially to go to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”, both the peasants and to the elite. But they will eventually spread throughout the world.

Second, the apostles must be clear about their tasks – about the work they are to do and the mission upon which they are entered. “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near’. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (vss. 7-8). They are to proclaim Jesus’ message of liberation (cf. 4:17). But they are also to implement that message, as they work directly both for the liberation of people (cf. 25:31-46) and the exposure and call to repentance of the Empire (cf. 23:1-36).

Third, when acting out their mission assigned them by Jesus, the apostles must be clear about their material options. “You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food” (vss. 8b-10). As Jesus had nowhere to lay his head, so should they. Apostles are not to materially benefit from the mission to which they have been called. And the reason why they are not to economically benefit is that if followers of Jesus become concerned about their financial welfare, political influence or social status, they will eventually become like the very Pharisees, Sadducees and priests whom they are called to criticize and hold accountable. Because human beings are naturally greedy, self-centered and yearning to dominate, if any follower of Jesus allows himself (herself) to become concerned about his or her welfare, then he or she will enter onto a slippery slope that will eventually lead him or her to be seduced by the “Powers that Be” rather than holding those Powers accountable.

Fourth, Jesus reminds the apostles of the inevitable impact they will have when they oppose the principalities and powers of any society. “As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly, I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that town” (vss. 11-15). The good news of God’s shalom community – of God’s intended world of justice, equitable sharing of wealth, the elimination of poverty, and our deepest relationships between both God and all humanity – this good news is proclaimed equally to all. But there are those who are “worthy” of this good news, who are chosen by God to receive it and to practice it in their public as well as private life, in their treatment of people politically, economically and religiously as well as personally. And there are those who “are not worthy” and who are so captured by the lust for power, greed or domination (whether they hold high position or low) that they shake off the shalom with which they are blessed. In that case, you are to “shake off their dust from your feet”. “For it will be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah” at judgment day than it will be for those who will not hear and will not accept and who will not change their life-course!

Finally, Jesus ends by reminding his followers, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes” (vss. 16-23).

It’s not a pretty picture that Jesus paints! Don’t be so naïve, Jesus teaches his followers, to believe that by proclaiming shalom, by treating the hurting and harassed with compassion and healing, by proclaiming truth to power or by working to liberate political, economic and religious systems that somehow things will just keep on getting better and better. That will not happen. In

fact, quite the contrary will happen. The unhappy fact is that the more you oppose evil, the more evil will fight back at you! The more you proclaim good, the more good will elude you. Do not underestimate the evil of the world or the depth of human depravity! So don't become naïve Christians. Be realistic, hard-as-nails followers of the Christ. For Christians are called to be pessimistic optimists – optimists in the recognition that God and the shalom kingdom will eventually win, but pessimists in recognizing that it will not come easily! Only operating out of such a dismal perspective can the followers of Jesus truly accomplish a work comparable to that of Jesus, for they will be honest but hopeful lovers who can “keep their eyes on the prize” while absorbing all that the evil of this world can throw at them!

**Romans 5:1-8** builds Paul's concept of grace. That recognition of grace reaches its climax in 5:12-21, where Paul points out how God's forgiving, redeeming grace has come upon us through “the one man, Jesus Christ.” He then concludes with the powerful words, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:20b-21).

But I particularly want to concentrate upon the opening lines of Romans 1: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (5:1-2).

Paul begins by stating, as an accomplished reality of life, that we are already justified by faith. The Greek tense used here is stating a completed state of action – something that God had already done even before we chose to believe. The work of redemption has already been accomplished by Christ on the cross, and has been achieved, once and for all. It is an accomplished act, a completed state of action in which all believers can be fully confident.

Because God's act of redemption is already done and need not be done again in order to be efficacious to us, then “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”. The text is not saying that we, as those who have received God's mercy, are responsible to make peace, to build the shalom community of justice, equity and union with God. It is instead saying that “peace”, like “grace”, is an accomplished act on God's part, and we become “peace-absorbing”, accepting “shalom” as a gift of grace from God to be both received by us and allowing that peace to so permeate and infuse us that we become “peace-makers” or “peace distributors” to the world!

So in what can we, as Christians, “boast” if we can't take pride in our actions that bring about world peace? We can take pride in only two things, Paul suggests. We can boast in God's redemptive work in Christ that brings us into a community of peace and makes us peace-makers. And we can boast in our sufferings. Paul writes, “We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5:3-5).

In what do we take pride? It is not in our obedience to the Law of Moses (that is, our keeping of the Ten Commandments), nor is it in our good works. Obedience or conformity to such will not win us eternal life. Eternal life has already been won for us through the gracious work of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is that work that is already done for us and is offered to us to receive or reject. If we are chosen by God, we will find that gracious work irresistible and will receive it. If our hearts are closed to God's redemptive action toward us, we will remain closed to that grace, our rejection being a self-fulfilling prophecy. So the only pride we can take is in a God who loves us so much that he will offer us abundant life through Christ, whether we are opened or closed to it.

But the other thing in which we can take pride is in the way that God goes about forming those who are responsive to God into the creation God intends us to be. And this God does through hard times!

Living with abundance, success and surrounded by love never built character in anyone! Only suffering, difficulties and pain shape us into a person of spiritual character. How is that so, one might ask? And Paul answers, "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us" (5:3b-5a). Like Abraham and Sarah (Romans 4:20), we mature in and grow strong in our trust and faith in God only by suffering! We should pray for suffering, for it is suffering that is the greatest indication of God's loving commitment to us – a commitment that doesn't only comfort but exercises our capacity for faith by trying that faith! This is so because, as "peace-makers" who are seeking to live out the peace God has placed in our hearts, we will respond to suffering with a receptivity and even a searching for what God is seeking to do through that pain or difficulty.

All human beings suffer. Salvation in Christ is no warrantee against suffering. But salvation in Christ opens us to a receptivity to see God's will and work in all that happens to us. And approaching suffering from that perspective will enable God to turn that suffering into good in our lives, as we grow in faith and love through its discipline.

When our attitude is a receptive, grace-filled attitude, then our suffering will sharpen our capacity to endure. And the steady accumulation of the capacity to endure will, in turn, result in a strengthening and sharpening of our character. And as our character matures, we will increasingly become a person of hope.

In the light of what he has just written, Paul now moves to the theological zenith of this passage. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (5:6-8).

When we, as budding people of faith, suffer and feel at our wit's end, it is precisely at that "right time", "while we are still weak", while we are still wrestling with our resentment or anger or dismay over the hard times in which we find ourselves – it is precisely then that "Christ died for the ungodly" (that is, us). Yes, in one sense, one can interpret this passage to say that Jesus' death took place "at the right time" of the divine timetable for the world's redemption (e.g., John



17:1; Acts 2:23; Gal. 4:4). But, in a more profound sense, it is precisely when we are in the moment of our deepest need and are crying out to God in our pain and suffering, that it is precisely at that time that Christ has come to die for us! It is only this interpretation that makes sense of Romans 5:6-8 being placed by Paul immediately following Romans 5:3-5, as the apostle seeks to explain how our suffering can become redemptive to us. It becomes redemptive to us because it is precisely when we need Christ the most that he – who historically died at a single point of time and at precisely the “right time” – now spiritually becomes life-and-death to us, at our “right time”, so that we might rely upon him to enable us to endure and thus build our character and hope!

It is at this point that Paul writes the clearest and most pithy statement of the gospel. “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners (struggling with our own suffering and depression), Christ died for us” (vs. 8). Here is the gospel in a nutshell. “Christ died for us”. The cross was not a misfortune for Jesus nor a blunder by God. Rather, it was ordained by God, as the epitome of suffering, pain and rejection by the systems, values and priorities of human society, to occur at the right time. For, Paul writes, “Christ died for us”.

At one and the same time, Paul makes an historical statement and a theological statement. “Christ died” – this is an historical fact. “For us” – this is the theological significance of that death. For Jesus’ death is God’s gracious action to meet us at the point of our deepest pain, suffering and despair, and to transform that moment so that we can become, in and through Christ, the mature, perfected human beings that God has called and intends us to be. This is the power of the Gospel. “Christ died for us!”

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