

A Lectionary 11 6.14.20

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7; Matthew 9:35-10:23

Focus Statement: God equips us with all that we need.

I joked a couple times in the Trumpet this week about how I really wish that someone had finished the book on “Pastoring in Times of Pandemic” so that I could buy it and learn all about how to re-engage in-person worship. Though if I’m honest with myself, while this is the first pandemic I’ve pastored through, this is not the first time I’ve wished for such a book. I also remember a deep longing for “Pastoring through a Bad Roofing Contract” and “What To Do When the Toilet Won’t Stop Flushing,” neither of which are book titles either.

Wanting more information than I have, or can have, is one of the things I struggle with as a leader. Before I got the new computer, I used to have a card taped to the monitor of the old one that said “Begin before you are ready” as a reminder that I usually cannot have all the information I need or want to feel “ready” to do something. Whether the thing is restarting worship during a pandemic, figuring out how to engage in dismantling systemic racism, or simply deciding where to put the welcome desk, I always want to know just one more thing before stepping forward. It’s actually one of the reasons I’m so grateful for our partnership with Co-op, because Teresa’s response to new ideas is the exact opposite of mine. She is a leap first, details second leader, whereas I tend to get so bogged down in details that I have trouble taking a step. We balance each other out well.

In the Old Testament reading, Abraham and Sarah seem to similarly balance each other out. Both here and in other stories, Abraham is portrayed as a jump first, think second guy, whereas Sarah tends to be more cautious. We’ll see over the next few weeks that both of

those approaches have weaknesses, but for now we'll just stay in the present. Which is that Abraham, who's been told that his descendants would outnumber the stars, was sitting looking out of his tent during the heat of the day when he noticed three travelers approaching from a distance. Abraham went out to them, offered them "a little bread," and then ran back into the tent and was like, "we've got company, all hands on deck! Get the best flour but don't just make bread, make cake! Kill that calf and let's get some steak going. Here, let me get them some cheese and crackers while they wait." Sarah, on the other hand, upon hearing that she is going to have a child, bursts out laughing. Now, in fairness, Sarah was somewhere north of ninety when this story takes place, so this prospective child is a bit of a long shot. Sarah's more measured response, while in this particular incident was wrong, does seem like the more logical one. And we also saw in chapter twenty-one that Sarah took being proven wrong in stride, naming the child Isaac, which means "laughter" because, "God has brought laughter for [Sarah]; and everyone who hears will laugh with [her]."

I've always thought of this as a story about radical hospitality, and I think it is that. But reading it along with the Gospel text for today, I also think it is a story about God acting before we are ready, and the promise of God's presence in times of uncertainty. As we'll see in the next few weeks, Sarah's laughter is not the only mistake these two will make. In fact, Sarah laughing at messengers of God who tell her she's going to have a baby at ninety is pretty cute in the bad decision department compared to what's coming, yet none of this stopped God from fulfilling God's promise to them, that their descendants would

outnumber the stars. And the Gospel reading is really Jesus giving a lesson in beginning before you are ready.

Because we haven't been in Matthew for a while, let's scene set a little bit. In Matthew, the teachings of Jesus are grouped into five major speeches. For the next three weeks, we'll be reading through the second of those speeches, what is known as the Missionary Discourse. In it, Jesus instructed his disciples on how to go about the work of "proclaim[ing] the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." The reading started by explaining how as Jesus "went about all the cities and village, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness." So, in other words, being Jesus. But while he was doing this, "when he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." So 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." "Ask for laborers," Jesus said, and then he sent the disciples. What's cool about this is the harvest is frequently a symbol of eschatological action. Eschatological remember being the fancy church word for the end of days, or as I've heard it better defined, the ultimate goal of humanity. Which we've read the past couple weeks, the ultimate goal of humanity is oneness, is relationship, with God as intimately as God and Jesus are one. So what this harvest imagery tells us is that the work the disciples are being commissioned for here is to be part of God's own mission. They are being called and sent not just to do nice things for others, but literally through acts of compassion to bring about the salvation of the cosmos. Friends, this is amazing. What this text is telling us is that the phrase we like to throw

around, “God’s Work, Our Hands,” that phrase literally means that the work we do is the work of salvation. That working the food pantry, setting veggies out for the neighbors, picking up trash, calling a friend, those actions are literally the work of God for the good of the world.

And then Jesus started giving the actual instruction. And if I had been a disciple, well, those instructions feel to me about as clear as *Pastoring Through a Pandemic*, *Through a Bad Roofing Contract*, or *What To Do When the Toilet Won’t Stop Flushing*. Jesus was like, “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper... no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff.” At this point, I’d be like, wait. How am I to do all the entirely impossible things you just commanded, without even so much as a pair of shoes? Jesus, I am not equipped for this! Of course, it didn’t stop there. Jesus went on, “see, I am sending you out like sheep in the midst of wolves.” Oh, this is getting better and better. “When” not if, but when, “when they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” And that, that right there friends. That and the last line of last week’s reading, the last line of the whole Gospel, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” that is the summation of the good news of this whole reading, of the whole mission to which we are sent.

Abraham and Sarah are not going to get this mission thing right, in fact they are going to get it tragically wrong. And the disciples are not going to get it right. The Great Commission

we heard last week was the first time the disciples were back on the scene in Matthew after having completely abandoned Jesus at his crucifixion. And we'll hear Jesus get frustrated with the disciples more than once before we switch to Mark in December. But those failures don't stop the work of God from continuing, don't stop the promise of God from unfolding. So we try, before we have all the answers, with the best wisdom we can muster, trusting that God will work with our broken attempts.

As I mentioned in the Trumpet, I don't know yet precisely when we will return to in-person worship, though I can guarantee that it will be outside for at least a time. My desire to be a good shepherd for you means I am absolutely going to err on the side of caution. We will go slowly into this new reality, trusting that God blesses our uncertainty.

This text also blesses our efforts to move quickly. Because while I worry about moving to quickly into worship, I know I also move to slowly in situations of injustice. It is long past time where it is not enough to simply be not racist, we must in fact be actively anti-racist. We need to be, as Bishop Eaton so beautifully phrased it last week, not color-blind but color amazed. Yet that same desire to have answers I cannot have, to know every possibility and carefully select the best, wisest, most thorough, most well-thought out, here that caution is a weakness. What is needed in this time and place is action, trusting we will get it wrong, and being willing to be corrected and learn along the way. And God blesses those actions too. God blesses every cautious step, while all the while urging us to walk more boldly in faith, trusting that we walk not alone, but with God.

Dear people of God, there are times for caution and times for action. These are times for caution and times for action. And sometimes, many times, it is easy to lose sight of what is brave action and what is foolish, what is good caution and what is inactivity. So we try, and we fail, and we try again tomorrow. And we do that with a God who promise “to be with [us] always, to the end of the age.” Thanks be to God. Amen.