

### **Genesis 18:1-15**

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. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, ‘My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.’ So they said, ‘Do as you have said.’ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?’ And he said, ‘There, in the tent.’ Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 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.’

### **Matthew 9:35—10:4**

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 labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.’

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax-collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

## The Impossible & Possible

In today's scripture texts there are several aspects of the OT and NT readings which echo each other. In terms of characters, in both passages we have less than perfect human actors in the drama. Both scripture texts affirm that God's intentions will carry the day, even with flawed human agents as partners in the Divine mission. Finally, the setting of the action in both passages is one of hospitality and sometimes awkward hospitality. These intermingled themes brought to mind a magazine article about Pastor Moses from earlier this year.

It's just past noon, and on the sweltering rooftop of the Bethany Church in Rajagiriya, Sri Lanka, Pastor Moses Akash de Silva and a team of volunteers are grating piles of carrots while K.D. Iranie hovers over a large pan, stirring a spicy fish curry atop a makeshift firewood cooker.

Ms. Iranie, who's in her 60s, has served as the main cook for the church's community kitchen since Pastor Moses started the project [last] June. "I come all five days a week," she says. "Seeing the people getting a delicious meal makes me so happy. ... I am doing what God wishes me to do."

At 12:30 p.m. sharp, after trays of fresh food are carried down four flights of steps, Pastor Moses signals a volunteer to open the church's grilled gates. At least a hundred men, women, and children eagerly file in, following the aromas of turmeric-infused fluffy yellow rice, fish and pumpkin curries, carrot sambol, and papadums. More will arrive with time. For many, this is their first proper meal in days.

Sri Lanka's worst-ever economic crisis has left nearly 30% of its 22 million people food insecure, according to the World Food Program, with food inflation soaring to 73% in November. The Voice Community Kitchen helps out by providing some 6,000 free lunches every week across roughly two dozen locations throughout Sri Lanka, while also bringing together different ethnoreligious communities that have historically struggled to find common ground. Pastor Moses says the initiative was born of pragmatism, compassion toward all Sri Lankans, and a desire to model the same generosity he experienced as a young person.

"I have gone for days without food, so I understand how these people feel," he says. "It does not matter to us what religion they are from, or if they have family, or what they do. If they are hungry, they are welcome to eat at our community kitchen."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Munza Mushtaq, "In Sri Lanka Food Crisis, Pastor Moses Shows the Power of a Free Lunch" in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (January 6, 2023). Also this can be accessed at [In Sri Lanka food crisis, Pastor Moses shows power of a free lunch - CSMonitor.com](https://www.csmonitor.com/News/2023/0106/In-Sri-Lanka-food-crisis-Pastor-Moses-shows-power-of-a-free-lunch)

The story is not unlike the origins of Mennonite Central Committee which continues this ministry feeding hungry people regardless of their religious or ethnic background. I will return to the story of Pastor Moses to conclude the sermon.

#### Scripture Text One: Genesis 18:1-15

This story, which on the surface narrates the origins of Isaac's name, more deeply reflects God's reclaiming of the divine promise of a son in Gen. 12:1-3. God does this even when we humans laugh in disbelief at what seems to be impossible.

Much about the narrative seems ordinary. The nomad Abraham is resting in the shade of his tent on a blistering afternoon, and in typical nomadic fashion he extends hospitality to three strangers who suddenly appear...Abraham is not puzzled by their unexpected arrival, nor is he curious about their destination. Travelers were a common sight, and the fact that they undertook their journey in the heat of the day meant only that their mission was of some importance. But the text soon begins to take on overtones of the extraordinary.

Their question, "Where is your wife Sarah?" is quite strange on two counts. First, it seems odd that they would know Sarah's name, because they were, after all, strangers. But secondly, even if they had earlier inquired about the couple in the tent at Mamre earlier in their journey, it is unlikely they would have mentioned Sarah's name while leaving Abraham's name unmentioned. Something supernatural seems at play.

The aura of the Divine is enhanced by the fact that Yahweh is one of the three travelers. VV 1-2 of this scene make the linkage as well as other things only God would know, like Sarah's name. God also knows of Sarah's skeptical attitude toward the promise of v.10, even though Sarah's laughter has been "to herself" (v.12). It is not out of arrogance that Yahweh asks, "Why did Sarah laugh?" (v.13). Rather, the question is a rhetorical device to place in tension human openness to the seemingly impossible and God's understanding of the possible. Sarah continues denial of laughter. God finds this somewhat humorous, which is underscored by the repeated use of the term "laugh". The name Isaac, in Hebrew, translates as "laughter".<sup>2</sup>

Once more, the promise of Genesis 12:1-3 has been in danger, and once more Yahweh has stepped forward to rescue it. The promise had been in peril from Abraham's and Sarah's faithlessness in Egypt, but had been saved by the intervention of Yahweh (12:10-20). It had likewise been endangered by Abraham's doubt, but had been safeguarded by Yahweh's reaffirmation in chapter 15. So now the promise is again reaffirmed in the face of Abraham's and Sarah's advanced

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<sup>2</sup> William P. Barker, *Everyone in the Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming R. Revell Company, 1966), p. 147.

age, and in spite of Sarah's self doubt. And all of this takes place under the oaks of Mamre while the two hosts and three travelers break bread together.

God is non-plussed in our doubt or fear of hoping for too much. God finds us in the desert of our lives in the blistering heat. God dines with us at the table when invited. God laughs at our laughs of cynicism—not in a ridiculing manner, but in a chiding and loving way. God is faithful even when we struggle with faithfulness. Our limitation do not limit God.<sup>3</sup> This treatment of the Genesis text brought to mind another story I read years ago which left an impression.

#### Welcoming the Stranger—Patrick Keifert

During the last week of my pastorate in a church in the city of Chicago, I was visiting a McDonald's, looking for a soft drink and fries and a chance to recover from the funeral I had just completed and to escape from the hot muggy air of...Chicago. As I started to eat my fries, a very large black man started toward the table. Being a racist, I immediately checked the security of my billfold and started to decide how much I would be willing to share with him. Without asking, he seated himself in the booth in which I was sitting, immediately across from me. Now I was nervous.

“How are you doing, Father?” he opened. I was wearing my clerical collar. “You look like you've had a bad day. Would you like to talk about it?”

I admitted to having a tough day. The funeral had not gone well. To start with, we had driven to the wrong cemetery. Things at the cemetery had not gone better. I was tired and somewhat discouraged about how I had been as a pastor to the family and friends of the deceased.

Then he reached across the table with his hand. Placing his index finger right in my chest, he asked, “Do you believe that stuff about Jesus rising from the dead? And do you believe it is true about you?”

I was, to put it mildly, taken aback by this question. Even though one can expect almost anything on the streets of Chicago, I had never had this happen before. In fact, although I had attended Sunday school since I was three years old, been confirmed in a conservative Christian denomination, passed denominational exams in two different church bodies, and taught at a denominational seminary, no one had ever asked me that questions.

I answered, “I guess I believe it. At least on my good days I believe it. On other days, I don't even pay attention to Jesus, much less the resurrection. On other days, I can't bring myself to accept it, even when I want to.”

He looked satisfied and said, “I thought so.” And then he left.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), pp 365-366.

A number of years later, when I was on sabbatical and reading the Gospel according to St. Luke and the Acts of the Apostles for my devotional reading, I came upon a passage in Luke 24 in which two are joined by a stranger on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Once again, as in the Abraham and Sarah encounter at the oaks of Mamre, the biblical stranger is the Lord.

The stranger chides them for being foolish and slow of heart and shares with them old stories of the faith tradition. They arrive at their village. The couple invites the stranger to a meal. The stranger offers a blessing. The Risen Christ was made known in the blessing and breaking of the bread.<sup>4</sup>

Patrick Keifert then relates this to the manner in which our theology of worship is at a crucial juncture in the life of mainline congregations. Do we take up conversation with strangers on the road. Do we continue to invite the strangers of our world to join us for a meal? He writes, “We have become so maintenance oriented that we fail to see the mission that is within our doors or at least within our neighbourhoods.” Keifert is raising the challenges inherent within many of our biblical stories: are we willing to engage the strangers around us? Are we willing to join in conversation as we walk, talk, and and break bread? Are we willing to receive the challenges and blessings they extend to us? Ironically, in the stories from Genesis and Mark and Luke and Patrick Keifert it is the guests who play the host offering a blessing to the community. Do have the liturgical and structural flexibility to foster such encounters? This is a discipleship question to consider. To the Mark passage.

#### Scripture Text Two: Matthew 9:35—10:4

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> scripture text is shorter than what the lectionary prescribes, and I will not reflect long upon it. A few highlights which intersect with our other stories:

1. Jesus’ attitude toward and insight into the plight of crowds should not be lost on us. He has compassion on them, curing what ails and sharing good news.
2. The listed disciples being sent out are a flawed group; consider their names. Three carry unusual distinctions that force us to ponder the character of this band. Matthew “the tax collector” is among the despised, partly because his profession is noted for fleecing the people and partly because it entailed collaboration with the Roman occupation. Simon the Cananaen which means he was, or still was, a zealot—a political enthusiast not opposed to violent revolution.<sup>5</sup> Then we have Judas Iscariot, “the one who betrayed him’. We have a collaborator working alongside a revolutionary working alongside a betrayer. Really?; are these the kind of people commissioned by Jesus and sent forth for ministry? You can’t make this stuff up!

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<sup>4</sup> Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1992), pp 155-157.

<sup>5</sup> William P. Barker, *Everyone in the Bible* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming R. Revell Company, 1966), p. 331.

3. Fortunately, their ministry is grounded in the ministry of Jesus himself. And Jesus, despite their shortcomings, will seek the healing of the people and the world itself through them. Again, our limitations do not limit the Christ.<sup>6</sup>
4. Finally, in a section of Mark 10 not read, the ministry to a hurting world is grounded in table fellowship. Stay in the homes of willing hosts. Eat the food offered to you—laborers deserve their food. Impart your peace to those who host you. When the stay runs its course, move on.

### Conclusion

We return to Pastor Moses. Raised in an orphanage in the hill capital of Kandy, Pastor Moses moved to Colombo at age 17 seeking better opportunities. He lived at a bus stop for three days before finding work as a cleaner at a polyethylene factory. It's there he met the senior pastor of Bethany Church, Dishan de Silva, who took him in.

Pastor Moses explains with a bright smile how he lived with the senior pastor for seven years. Senior Pastor de Silva founded the Voice for Voiceless Foundation in 2015 and later handed over the reins to Pastor Moses, who has since spearheaded multiple charitable initiatives as the foundation's national director.

For Pastor Moses, the community kitchen's mission is simple: Feed the hungry. But he does hope the work will have a ripple effect by inspiring generosity among all who engage with the project.

"I am who I am because of the upbringing I had in the orphanage and the help I got throughout the years since I came to Colombo," he says. "I hope others who volunteer here and those who I have taken under my wings will follow my footsteps by serving the people."<sup>7</sup>

May we learn to reframe the seemingly impossible with openness to the possibilities God has in mind. May we do this through the stories we have been given, the strangers whom we meet, the mentors and teachers we are given, and the transcendent Spirit which dwells within and around us. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, James D. Newsome: *ibid*, pp 368-370.

<sup>7</sup> Mushtaq, *ibid*.