

Who Called This Meeting?

Genesis 18:1-5, 16-33

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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“How could you do this, God?” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “Where are you? What’s going on?” It was an unlikely prayer. It was an unlikely setting for prayer. It was a beautiful spring day. I was sitting on a decrepit green bench on a small porch in front of the Geneva College steam plant overlooking the Beaver River. A couple of hours before, I had been in the dorm when the phone rang and my friend Dave said, “Dave – something’s happened to Steve. You better get over here now.” We were four days away from graduation. The classes were done and it was “senior week” – a chance for the class to spend some time together before splitting up for good. Steve and a group of friends had been playing softball. With no notice, and no prior symptoms, Steve, a healthy and active 22 year-old business major with a great job lined up and a beautiful fiancée, dropped dead from a heart attack. Like a lot of folks on the campus that day, I wondered where God had gotten off to while this had happened. How could God be God and something like this go on?

You’ve prayed that prayer, I think. Oh, you didn’t know Steve. But you’ve been there – wondering what’s keeping God, where God is hiding, why God is doing something...You’ve been there, haven’t you?

That’s why I can’t get over some of what we’ve read in Genesis in recent weeks. We’ve been following the story of Abraham, and whereas there have been times when it seems like you and I have not been able to find God, the Lord keeps showing up in Abraham’s life like a bad toothache – Abraham can’t escape God. Listen:

Gen. 12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country...”

Gen. 12:7 Then the LORD appeared to Abram...

Gen. 13:14 The LORD said to Abram...

Gen. 15:13 Then the LORD said to Abram...

Gen. 17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram...

Gen. 17:9 God said to Abraham, “As for you...”

Gen. 17:15 God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife...”

Gen. 18:1 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre...

Do you see what I mean? Whereas you and I sometimes have a hard time finding God, Abraham couldn’t escape him. This morning we’re going to take a look at one of the encounters between Abraham and God in the hopes that we’ll learn something about what it means for us to encounter the Lord; we’ll listen in on this unusual prayer and hope that we can learn something about praying ourselves...

Our story was introduced when God showed up at Abraham’s tent. Abraham, responding the way that any decent Middle Easterner of the time would have, offered lavish hospitality and received the as-yet unrecognized guests warmly. After lunch had been served, the guests made to leave, and Abraham walked with them for a while. And then the prayer begins – and it begins with God talking.

This is a fascinating speech by God in which God indicates that Abraham is a friend. Verse 17 reads “I have chosen him”; the Hebrew word is *yada*, and it means “I have known him” or “I have made him my friend.” God has changed the fundamental relationship of creator and creation, of judge and penitent, and has made Abraham a partner of sorts. This is demonstrated further when we read that God has chosen Abraham for righteousness and justice. That’s a phrase that appears only this once in Genesis, but shows up time and time again in describing the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Amos.

The righteousness and justice of Abraham is contrasted with the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. God is on his way to judge these towns and pauses on his journey to talk with Abraham about his plans.

In verse 23, Abraham begins to use the credibility he's gained with God by calling his creator to account for himself. His sense of righteousness and justice is offended by God's plan, and he makes no bones about it as he approaches God.

Maybe you've read this passage before. Maybe you've heard the story of how Abraham pleaded for these cities before God. If you've been here lately, this isn't the first time you've heard about the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Do you remember in chapter 14? Chedorlaomer had wiped out these towns and taken their leading citizens hostage and Abraham (aka Sean Connery) had gone into battle and saved them all. Abraham's nephew Lot lived in Sodom. These weren't merely strange-sounding names to Abraham, they were cities with streets and houses and familiar faces. And upon hearing that God intends to destroy them for their wickedness, Abraham raises the question with God.

It is possible to read this conversation between Abraham and God as an example of middle-eastern "bargaining", wherein God says he's going to destroy the city and Abraham says, "Well, what if you can find 50 righteous people in it?" God says, "All right, I'll give you 50." In this view, Abraham is a skilled negotiator whose aim is to find God's lowest price – is it fifty? Or forty-five? What about forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? Wow, Abraham is good. Way to go, Abe! Good job!

Except that reading of scripture flat-out misses the point. There can be no bargaining here because Abraham has nothing to trade. What is he offering God? Nothing! Abraham has nothing to bargain with.

Abraham is not haggling with God – Abraham is exploring the heart of God. He is trying to figure out who God is. If there is one thing that Abraham has built his life on, it's the fact that God is just and faithful. And in this passage, Abraham is questioning God, asking, "God, how can you do this and be God?" In faith, in humility, in love...Abraham affirms the goodness of God and shows his concern for the entire city, not just his relatives, and he expresses his desire to understand the character of God.

In his questioning, Abraham is struggling between two things that he has always counted on: on the one hand, he is simply terrified by the amazing power of God – the omnipotence of the almighty. Abraham knows that God can wipe him out in a second. And on the other hand, Abraham is concerned for the justice and character of God.

You see, this set of numbers wherein Abraham seems to haggle God down from fifty to ten isn't really the point. Abraham is not arguing about the fate of Sodom, he is questioning the character of God. Abraham is questioning God about God's integrity...do you hear that in these verses? "Far be it from you to slay the righteous with the wicked...right? You couldn't do that and still be who you say you are, God, right?"

When viewed like this, the prayer of Abraham becomes an experience of terror. Abraham is not seeing if he can get God to cut the rate by fives and tens; instead, this apparent haggling is the terrified progress of one who fears that each step forward may be his last. Each breath of this prayer is filled with fear and longing..."O, let not the Lord be angry...I just want to say one thing..."

The prayer, for Abraham, was a chance for him to ask some huge questions about God to God. Finally, when Abraham gets to ten, the conversation ends. Why?

Maybe Abraham had been reassured. Each time God patiently answered Abraham by saying, “For the sake of fifty, or forty, or thirty, or twenty, or ten, I will not do it...”, the image of God changes a little bit in Abraham’s mind. God is not alien. God is not cruel. God is not arbitrary. God is a God who honors his promises. At the end of the day, Abraham was convinced that God’s power was exercised only in the light of God’s righteousness. When the prayer was finished, Abraham understood God less than before, maybe, but he trusted him more than before. He knew God better.

That’s what happens, more or less, in Genesis 18. Knowing that, what can we say about prayer?

Prayer begins and ends with God. Did you notice that in the reading today? God showed up on Abraham’s doorstep, as we said. God broached the subject of Sodom and Gomorrah. God waited for Abraham to talk about it. And in verse 33, the Lord ends the conversation by dismissing Abraham.

Have you ever noticed the way a conversation is affected by who starts? When you’re in a new place, for instance, and someone welcomes you and warms to you? When you’re in the wrong, and you approach someone else, and they make it easy for you by speaking the first word to you? As we saw at the beginning of the message, Abraham’s experience was that God spoke first. My experience is the same. So is yours. God is always speaking – hearing his voice is not mysterious – it just requires paying attention to the world around us. When we pray, we are always responding to God’s movement in the world. God acts, and we respond. That’s why on page 6 of the bulletin, you are invited to begin your prayer time by reading a Psalm and then another scripture – to remind yourself that Someone Else is speaking, Someone Else is praying before you even open your mouth.

Secondly, we could take from this passage the truth that God is approachable to those whose hearts are open and humble. Did you hear verse 22? God is ready to move, but he waits for Abraham to speak. The Creator of Heaven and Earth stops what he is doing in order to listen to his friend and his servant. He hasn’t stopped doing that, you know. God is willing to wait for you.

Another lesson on prayer from this text is that prayer is hard work. Sometimes we Christians like to get lazy and pray what I might call a *que sera, sera* prayer. We come before the Lord with a big question or a huge concern, and then instead of opening ourselves up to God and talking honestly about our hopes or fears, we say, “So, God, do this if it is your will Amen.” As John White points out in *Daring to Draw Near*,

Prayer does indeed have to do with accomplishing God’s will. You are called into prayer either that you might collaborate with him in bringing his will to pass or that you might get a larger vision of what he is like. The phrase ‘if it be thy will’ is more often than not a cop-out. It means I don’t have to come to grips with God. I need not bother to find out what God’s will is. Nor do I have to exercise faith in the character of the Invisible One who works miraculously in the face of impossible odds.¹

And finally, when we look at this passage as a model for prayer we learn that we cannot have a relationship with God without asking the “big questions”. That’s why I remember that prayer after Steve died so many years ago. Here I was, thinking that I was being called into a ministry wherein I would tell people of the love and grace of God, and God goes and pulls something like this on me? That’s what I thought, in my anger – that Steve’s death was somehow about *me!* So on that May day so many years ago, I stood before the Lord and I demanded that he defend himself. I commanded him to explain his actions. If God wanted a guy like me on his team, he had better do some talking, because things just weren’t looking too good.

¹ *Daring to Draw Near: People in Prayer* (InterVarsity paperback, 1977, p. 18-19).

Well, as you might imagine, at the end of the day my tears were not dry...and God had not stooped to defend himself or his actions to me. Instead, God listened to me. And God spoke to me. Through scripture, through silence, through a peace in my heart, God spoke. I have never found God to be unwilling to speak about the stuff that really matters. I know that there are some believers who seem to think that the most important thing on God's mind is whether or not I'll find a good parking place at the Wal-Mart, but my experience is that God is most present when I am willing to risk my sweat and tears on the things that are most important to me and to God's world.

You are here because God invited you to worship. You are able to sing because God has given you a voice. Beloved, use that voice to express the joys and fears of your heart. Lay yourself and your world in front of God – maybe trembling as much as old Abraham was – and know that you are heard. And stick around, and listen for how God answers the prayers of your heart. Amen.