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“The Oaks at Mamre”

Genesis 18: 1-15

Come with me on a journey down Old River Road along the banks of the Mississippi. It's an old road, rich with history etched in its every turn. Old plantation mansions lie in ruin on the left. A few miles down is another old home, this one restored and home to a modern family. Across the mighty river is a Creole plantation, painted in gaudy colors but dripping with historical legends. At the end of the 80-mile stretch of plantations along the Old River Road is the grandest of all: “Oak Alley Plantation”. If you close your eyes, you can imagine it – there is a long stretch of oak trees in two perfect rows. Peer with me through the regal trees.

From this vantage point, you can imagine the many children who ran through the trees, laughing and playing hide-and-seek. You can envision picnics and summer socials out on the lawn in the humid Louisiana summer, enjoyable only because of the shade of these old oak trees. You can see the hustle and sweat on the faces of slaves who were the backbone of plantation work. You can see the elegant plantation mansion at the end of these trees and you realize the home has been named for the trees leading to it – Oak Alley.

Around the world and through the branches of time, we peer today through the leaves of different oaks, at Mamre, in what is now Israel. This grove of trees has a 4,000 year history – mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible – they lie about twenty miles south and slightly west of Jerusalem, just outside the city of Hebron (an ancient city that still makes the news today). The oaks at Mamre are well known even today. They are a contrast to the mountainous, desert climate in Israel, and they provide shade to weary travelers. If you stop there, you can see the tree though to be the actual old, old tree of Abraham. It is gnarly and bent, almost dead and held up with steel beams.

It was underneath the oaks at Mamre that our ancient forbearer, Abraham, built an altar, where he pleaded with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was near the same grove of oak trees at Mamre that Abraham purchased the cave in which he buried his wife, and where he himself and many of his descendants would be buried. But those things happened after our story for today – the story where Abraham and Sarah welcomed guests under the oaks at Mamre – a story where Abraham and Sarah actually entertained God, who had come to earth for this special occasion in human form.

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 favor 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."

Genesis 18: 1-15 NRSV

Rick Lowery, an Old Testament scholar friend of mine, says that many of the Old Testament stories are misunderstood. They appear, at first glance, to be about one thing; but if you delve deeper, they are told for a completely different purpose. This story, he says, isn't about angelic messengers or about miracle babies. **This story is about hospitality.** In fact, this story is setting the stage for another well-known story – about the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. These are parallel stories – one a positive example of hospitality and the other is an example of poor hospitality. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, says Rick Lowery, is not the frequently cited sexual immorality problem but a lack of hospitality. But that's another sermon.

Back to our story about Abraham and the oak trees... In the heat of the afternoon, Abraham was resting in the tent doorway, and looked up to see strangers approaching. The Talmud (sacred writings of the Jewish rabbis who read and explained scripture) says that when the strangers arrived, Abraham was talking to God. But when they came he stopped the conversation and offered them hospitality. According to the Talmud, this text shows that extending hospitality to the stranger is even more important than our private conversations with God.

To Abraham, it appears that these three people are no more than desert travelers. However, the storyteller uses what is called dramatic irony – the readers know more than the characters in the drama know. And what the reader is clued into is that one of these guests is actually God! Later interpreters suggest that the three strangers are actually the three members of the Trinity. If you ever watched “Mission Impossible” or “Columbo”, you've witnessed this technique.

When Abraham runs to meet these guests and “bows down to the ground”, he is extending a culturally conditioned greeting – but this is a special greeting for regal guests, a humble gesture that would make the guests not only feel welcome, but special. Abraham is not the kind of host who welcomes people into his tent to show them his best china, to have his children perform, or to take them on a tour of his impressive land. Instead, he humbles himself and treats them as if they were more important than

him. **This is the first lesson of hospitality – that a host puts aside any thoughts of self and takes on the role of a caretaker for the guest.**

By doing this, the host indicates that his impressive house and ornate dishes are not a credit to himself, but offered as a compliment to the guest. The great cooking, then, is not something done by the host to receive compliments, but a gift of skill and love offered because the guest is important. If we apply these principles to the church as a host, then what is important is not what we like or feel good about, but how we welcome our guests. We aren't here to accomplish our catching up with one another as much as we are here to talk to and share our lives with our guests.

While the strangers wash and rest in the shade of the great oak trees, Abraham promises to bring a bit of bread for refreshment. Then he hurries to the tent and blurts out to Sarah, "Quickly take three measures of finest flour, knead it, and make cakes." There is some disagreement about the modern equivalent of a "measure", but there is no doubt that it was a huge amount. In fact, our best guess is that it was about 1/3 of a bushel. To add to this generous portion of hot cakes, Abraham runs to his herd and selects a "young calf, tender and good," and gives it to his servant, who hurries to prepare it. He then takes curds and milk and the calf, sets them before the strangers and stands near them under the tree while they eat.

These verses describe in detail the actions of a perfect host. Experiences in the modern Middle East can parallel this one. So Abraham's "bit of bread" turns into a sumptuous luncheon, with the host standing by, waiting to fulfill every need of his guests. Can you imagine how his guests felt – nurtured, cared for, special, and honored. Any hearer of this story in ancient times would have seen Abraham as the perfect host. **This is the second lesson of hospitality – that the host is generous with whatever means she has in order to make the guest feel welcome, special, and honored.**

By doing this, the host demonstrates that the guests are no less important than a divine visitor, no less important than God. In fact, each person is honored as an imago-dei, a part of God's own self. **To treat each person as if God is in them, that is the work of hospitality.** And it is one of the most

sacred functions of the church... that we treat one another as sacred. That means we are not only respectful, but that we offer each other the benefit of the doubt. It means that we are deeply interested and concerned about one another, not second-guessing and joking about one another's quirks. It means that when we spend time together, we treat it as sacred breaking of the bread. Being hospitable means treating each person as you would treat God.

But the guests from the desert have a surprise of their own. They ask about Sarah, and then offer a blessing to the old couple – the promise of a child. This is impossible, argue Abraham & Sarah, we're infertile and we're old. It was such an unexpected blessing that it was laughable! And laugh they did. **This is the third lesson of hospitality – that the guest often brings with them an unexpected gift of life and hope.**

I have a friend, Sam, who always picks up hitchhikers. He will even pick up someone going the other direction and drive him or her back to a city they are heading toward from where he just left! Many of us have warned him that it is not smart to put himself in that danger, but he insists that his life has been blessed in some unexpected way each time he has offered a ride. One hitchhiker had some acquaintance with a long-lost friend of Sam's and through the hitchhiker they were connected again. Another hitchhiker told Sam a story that fit perfectly into the sermon he wanted to write but for which he had no focus. Yet another offered him the last few bits of change she had in her pocket to help out with gasoline and Sam realized that he had been offered a tremendous gift – all she had – that put his own financial stress into perspective. Sam says that he knows it is a risk - offering rides to people he doesn't know – a risk he realizes could cost him his personal safety. But, he laughs, he's always receiving more than he gives.

These are the marks of Godly hospitality – humbling yourself for the guests' benefit; treating the guest as you would treat God; and realizing that the guest often gets the last laugh in bring an unexpected gift to you!

Resource Used:

“Behold the Tree” written by Aiden W. Mead and Peter J. Mead. Creative Communications for the Parish. 2001.