

Gina: Our scripture for today includes parts of Chapters 18 and 21 in Genesis. It is a story of extravagant warm hospitality, serious doubt, laughter, and letting go. The star of this rendition is not the great patriarch, Abraham but Sarah, his wife.

Our story begins with these words: 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. Abraham 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."

Kevin: I love the way this story messes with our heads. First it says, “The Lord appeared to Abraham”, implying one divine entity appears but then the focus shifts quickly to three men. So which was it? One or three? When the early church fathers were trying to explain the Holy Trinity, this ancient story from the Hebrew Bible was helpful. Look, they said... Three in one, the blessed Trinity!

But more importantly, this is a story of hospitality, what we in the UCC like to call an extravagant welcome. Just like the father in the story of the prodigal son, Abraham didn't wait for the travelers to arrive at the door of his tent, he ran out to greet them. He didn't know who they were or where they were going. He didn't know anything about their histories, theologies, political parties, or views on social issues. He saw in them the living presence of God. And likewise, I am sure that they experienced the living presence of God, not just in Abraham, but Sarah as well.

After all, *Sarah* was the one who actually prepared a meal for them. *Sarah* quenched their thirst by drawing cool water. *Sarah* added wood to the fire, baked bread from scratch, and brought the travelers curds and fresh milk. She even roasted a calf for them, while Abraham chitty-chatted away.

All of our five reVision ministry teams focused on these same themes: extravagant welcome and creating ways that both our mountain neighbors and we, we ourselves, could experience the living presence of God. How do we experience the divine? In selfless acts of love, caring, and welcoming as shown by Sarah and Abraham. In God's eyes, there are no strangers, just friends we are always in the process of getting to know more deeply. So it is with each one of us as we seek the presence of God within ourselves and everyone we encounter.

Abraham and Sarah welcomed these travelers as friends and companions, companions on the journey into the heart of God. They celebrated together and had a party. Much later, Jesus said, “for where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them. He didn't say this with a sanctimonious or saintly face, but in the midst of laughter, good food and drink, and dancing. So it shall be with you, my friends. Long after Carol and I have said our good-byes, you and Rev. Melanie Weiner will welcome more people into the party *with* God, the divine party *in* God that is Skyland Community Church.

Gina: One of the three travelers said, “where is your wife, Sarah?” Abraham replied, “There, in the tent.” The traveler, who was actually, a messenger from God 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. Both Abraham and Sarah were very old, advanced in age and several decades beyond their childbearing years.

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"; because she was intimidated by the Lord. God said, "Oh yes, you *did* laugh." Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, a son they named Isaac. What does the name Isaac mean? It comes from a Hebrew name (*Yitz-chaq*) meaning "he will laugh, he will rejoice."

Kevin: This is where our journey has taken us, my travel companions on our sacred journey of faith. We have experienced the unexpected presence of God in our midst. In silent openness to God's presence, by ourselves at home and in silent contemplation together in Whitaker Hall. We have discovered the living presence of Christ in the hearts of families and individuals who have joined us in our adventures together. We have broken bread and drank from the cup of the new covenant. We have watched God heal the sick and broken-hearted and celebrated our loved ones who now live with God. We have shared in holy laughter together.

Today we *rejoice*, not only for what has *been*, but for whom you shall become, guided by Rev. Weiner and the dance of the Holy Spirit among you. God has brought you to a land of milk and honey as you enter into the fullness of summer. A time when not only fruits and vegetables grow in the warmth of summer days, but also a time when hearts expand in joy for God's blessings. You will settle into new patterns, welcome new leaders, and continue to do God's work in the beautiful mountains you cherish.

Like Sarah, you may doubt God from time to time. Who are *we* to experience *pleasure* in this season of our lives? Who are *we* to give birth to new life in the midst of hollowed out old apple trees, madrones that hang dangerously over roads, and truly ancient redwoods? My friends, you are both hosts and travelers. You help everyone taste the goodness of God's love and experience the depth of God's grace. All of us have been strengthened for the next phase of what will now be our separate journeys into the living heart of God's love.

May we laugh, celebrate, and give thanks to the one in whom we live and move, and have our being. You are strengthened so that you may be astounded on the next steps of the journey into the living heart of God's love.

Nothing is too wonderful for God. Prepare to be astounded yet again and again by the power and grace of the living God dancing among you. Amen.