



*Listen to the silence
let it enfold you,
like a piece of music,
like bird-watching.*

—Esther de Waal

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 14 June 2020

Invitation to Prayer

That you may receive God's hospitality, remove as best as you are able any distractions.

*This might include finding a quiet space free from interruption,
removing clutter from the area, turning off your phone and other electronic devices.
Also, it can be helpful to take a few moments to free your mind of worries and tasks,
relinquishing all things into God's care for a time
so your heart and mind can come fully into God's presence.*

Gathering Prayer — from *Circles of Grace* by Keri Wehlander, adapted

In this moment, O God,
I turn to you.

May the ebb and flow of my thinking
settle into stillness.

May the heaviness within me
be released into your love.

May the cycle of my breathing
restore a spaciousness within.

Come to me, Spirit of Life, create space in me
to listen deeply,
to encounter,
to dwell with you.

Scripture Reading—Genesis 18:1–15

This reading follows the style of a typical annunciation scene in scripture—a visitor or visitors come with a message of an extraordinary birth. In contrast to most annunciation accounts, the mother-to-be, Sarah, hears of her impending pregnancy indirectly by eavesdropping on the conversation between the messengers and her husband Abraham.

Nevertheless, Sarah has a part to play since holy consummation depends upon a willing response, for God's love is not coercive. Or as Joan Chittister puts it, "Hospitality is not simply a matter of opening the door; it is a matter of opening the heart."



As you read this story, take time to let it develop in your imagination by pausing to engage with Abraham and Sarah in the places indicated.

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.

Imagine you are Abraham. How do you respond?

When Abraham 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."

Imagine you are Sarah. How do you respond?

Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.

Then Abraham 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.

Imagine you are Sarah. How do you respond?

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."

Going Deeper

Each of us brings our experiences, our history, and our present reality to scripture. This is our part of the conversation with the Spirit who speaks through the words and in between the lines. Recall your responses as you took Abraham and Sarah's place in your imagination.

- What, if anything, is revealed in your responses?

Hospitality is a significant theme in scripture. In the desert environment of Abraham and Sarah, it was a matter of life and death. In the Hebrew, the word "fetch" is used four times and the word "hurry" three times in rapid succession.

- What do you notice about the hospitality shown in this story?
- How does this encourage you or give insight?

When Abraham first hears that he and Sarah will bear a child in chapter 17, he laughs. In this story, Sarah has the same response. Then, in chapter 21 when their son is born, Sarah laughs with joy. The name of their son, Isaac, means laughter in Hebrew. Consider these two quotes about joy:

Joy is the most infallible sign
of the presence of God.

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Joy has no name. It's very being is lost in the
great tide of selfless delight—creation's
response to the infinite loving of God.

—Evelyn Underhill

- In what ways do these quotes resonate with your experience?
- When is the last time you laughed heartily and what life did it bring to you?

Silent Meditation

You might choose to spend some moments in silent meditation.

How to meditate—from the World Community for Christian Meditation

To meditate, sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase, "Ma-ra-na-tha." Say it as four syllables of equal length.

Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning simply to saying the word.

Prayers of Intercession

Welcoming God, in this wintery season, you spread before us a bounty of earthly delights—brisk morning air, warming sun, splashes of colour in gardens, crashing waves on rocky shorelines, and long nights for quiet activity and rest. Thank you for your love to us and all creation.

We pray for those for whom this season is bitter and harsh, for those who are victimised by systemic injustice, for those who wait in desperation of anger for a new day to dawn...

In your great love: *receive the yearning of our heart.*

We pray for the easing of restrictions happening close to home and in our own country. Now and in the future, may we work together to keep each other safe; may we work together to build communities of equality, justice and neighbourly concern...

In your great love: *receive the yearning of our heart.*

We pray for those near and dear to our heart and for ourselves...

In your great love: *receive the yearning of our heart.*

Disciples' Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

Blessing — Guatemalan song

The peace of the earth be with you,
The peace of the heavens too;
The peace of the rivers be with you,
The peace of the oceans too.
Deep peace falling over you;
God's peace growing in you.

The love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Spirit be with us all.

Reflections in Solitude — Week 12
Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

“Look towards heaven and count the stars... so shall your descendance be.” This was the promise made to Sarah and Abraham, the hope with which they let go of the familiar in order to spend a lifetime on pilgrimage. By definition, the nomadic life is one of continual change and discovery. Like them, as pilgrim people we must not cling to landscapes that are transient. Rather than being weighed down with the material, we carry lightly our acquired wisdom and sacred memories as we move with the Spirit.

Despite their faithfulness, the promise was not forthcoming for Sarah and Abraham, at least not in the time or way they imagined. So, they took matters into their own hands, declaring Ishmael—Abraham’s son by Sarah’s maid Hagar—to be the first in God’s promised constellation. In their minds, Ishmael’s birth was seen not as an alternative plan, but *the plan* God must have intended all along.

But the annunciation scene (Genesis 18) leaves no doubt that nothing is too wonderful for God. The alignment of stars needed for Sarah and Abraham would be God’s doing, for by then they were beyond childbearing. Sarah had reached her menopause and Abraham was... well, old. In the Hebrew, Sarah uses the word “shrivelled” to describe the situation and acknowledges they are past pleasuring each other, so how was conception even possible? The mere thought caused Sarah to giggle behind the tent flap.

The earthy innuendoes within this story point to the gift and necessity of delight and joy within the spiritual life. The journey with God is not a dry and sombre one. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

We are earthed and grounded creatures. Therefore, the joy that signals the presence of God is full-bodied, sensate and all-inclusive. What may bring a blush to our faces—especially within a religious context—is a strong thread within the fabric of our faith, especially among the mystics ancient and contemporary.

For example, below is one of the many prayers by Gertrude of Helfta (13th c.) given to the novices in her care to pray:

*My lover, my lover, give me your blessing;
flow out and let me in.
From my heart, from my heart,
I long for you, and I beg you,
beloved of my heart,
that I may be your own. Ah!
That in your living love,
I may sprout out in a new spirituality
like the lilies that enjoy the water and the valley.*



As voices throughout the centuries attest, the alchemy needed for fruitful faith and life is not divine intervention alone. Like consenting lovers, we must be open and willing, reaching out and making space for that Love which is always coming into our world.

Abraham is an example of this as he extends hospitality to the three visitors, receiving them as holy guests. Like Gertrude’s prayer, Abraham’s welcome is complete and without hesitation. He does not hold back and offers more than an obligatory cup of water and rest in the shade.

It is this generosity of heart and being that enables the consummation of love that bears fruit in our world. Quite literally, Abraham’s old self will need to be enlivened by the hopeful message of the visitors so that he might play tender host to his wife Sarah. And metaphorically, but just as tangibly, Sarah and Abraham will need to welcome the Source of Joy into their midst, to allow themselves to be reinvigorated heart and soul. It is this fulsome hospitality that will bring forth Isaac, the child of their laughter, delight and joy.

The shrivelled barrenness into which this story brings hope and newness of life is a state of being any of us can know, regardless of our age. Relationships settle into familiar patterns, some of which inhibit growth and stifle spontaneity. Unprocessed disappointment, suffering and grief cause our souls to wither or retract in self-protection. Fear and indifference keep us confined to what has always been, closing us off from alternative ways of being and opportunities for deeper, truer expressions of love.

More specifically, this time has been like a roller coaster as we retreated into isolation, adapted, discovered (or rediscovered) gifts, and managed tensions and anxieties. Now, we look to experience many of the same peaks and dips as we move back out into the world which is both familiar and strange.

Add to the pandemic the bushfires, floods, economic uncertainty, and cries for justice in the streets and we may be able to identify with Sarah and Abraham in the barren wilderness. The very real troubles that need our attention and good effort can feel all-too-hard, and the idea that nothing is too wonderful for God seems ludicrous.

But as the story of Sarah and Abraham affirms, being hospitable is the key to unlocking joy and life, not just for ourselves as individuals but for the collective within communities large and small. And Joan Chittister rightly says, I think, “Hospitality is not simply a matter of opening the door; it is a matter of opening the heart.”

Several UnitingCare Emergency Relief centres across the state are experiencing this firsthand. Besides the obvious hospitality shown day-to-day, we are forming partnerships across the divide of theological, cultural, socio-economic and other differences that usually keep us from relating well, if at all. One of the new relationships we forged in these weeks is with the newish independent church in Glenelg, City Light. We are quite different churches in many ways and, sadly, these differences have kept us at arm’s length much of the time.

But COVID has unlocked the door between us and Viv is one of the volunteers from City Light whose employment ended because of the shutdown. In her dire situation, Viv chose to volunteer because in her words, “Jesus has filled me with love and asked me to share it.”

One day this week, a young woman came to St. Andrews for support. Arriving from Nepal at the beginning of the year, A. is a nursing student who, along with her husband, is struggling without income because of the pandemic. Besides the food we could offer, we linked A. with Viv who is herself on a temporary Visa from Brazil and is experiencing the challenges of survival in this climate. It was beautiful to watch the two young women sharing in solidarity, speaking in stilted English about their hardships and resourcing one another practically and with heart-to-heart connection.

It occurred to me this little spark of joy would not have come about without genuine hospitality—to others, to possibility, to the Divine Other. In recollecting this event now, I see an open heartedness by many people at many different thresholds, an openness that welcomed the Spirit into our midst and enabled God’s love to flow.

Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote, “How should one live? Live welcoming to all.” How are you being invited to open your door *and heart* to the manifestations of Love that come to us daily? May we be encouraged by the fulsome hospitality of Sarah and Abraham that brought joy and life to their barrenness and may it be so for each of us.

