

February 22: God at the Table (Genesis 18:1-8)

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Welcome to “At the Table,” our new series that revolves around moments in our spiritual history where God and humanity come together around the table. Throughout our Bible, there have been numerous occasions where hospitality and food have been the origin of deep relationship and nurtured faith—and we get to participate in this story of meals and memories. Each Sunday, we’ll study passages that invite us into different experiences at the table, and learn how we can be transformed by God’s grace and abundance.

God of abundance, you keep on surprising us by showing up in the people and places around us. We welcome your presence with us this morning. Make your word to us clear, and give us the grace to see you in the stranger and make space for you at our tables and in our hearts. Amen.

How many of you had breakfast before coming to church this morning? And how many of you would say that you ate well? I had breakfast this morning, and it got the job done – but I don’t think that it qualified as eating well.

What does it mean to eat well? Think about a meal you’ve had, where after it was all over, you sat back, maybe in a food coma, and thought, “I ate well.” What was it about the meal that gave you that feeling of deep contentment?

When I was 21 years old, I did a sixth-month internship in northern Côte d’Ivoire, working with a public health team in a rural area. And during one of their nutrition planning sessions, this question came up – what does it mean to eat well? And right away, with confidence, Ezekiel (one of the team members) answered: “To eat well means, first, that you have eaten meat. And second, it means that you have eaten together.” And everyone agreed with him. This was not a wealthy area, and meat wasn’t part of most meals. It was served at special occasions, and was associated with abundance and feasting and celebration. It was unthinkable to enjoy meat alone – meat was meant to be shared, to be the centerpiece of a festive meal bringing people together. For Ezekiel, “eating well” meant so much more than successfully meeting his body’s nutritional requirements. It meant feeding his soul, strengthening his bond with others, celebrating God’s abundant gifts with gratitude, sharing joys and sorrows, and sanctifying an important community event.

Ezekiel's description of "eating well" has stuck with me, because though eating meat isn't at the center of how I eat well, he was pointing out something fundamental about what it means to be human. As members of the animal kingdom, eating is essential to our survival, since we can't produce our own energy. But as human beings created in the image of God, eating and coming together around food, is about so much more – it has spiritual, social, emotional, ethical, and cultural dimensions, and they are just as essential to our well-being and flourishing as the nutrition we get from food. We are created with the desire and need to be in community around a table.

Perhaps that's why meals are so central to the narrative of the Bible, from the beginning to the end. Some of the first words God spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden were about what they could and should not eat, and the first recorded meal in the Bible had disastrous, long-lasting consequences we're still grappling with. In God's grace, though, there are many more meals throughout Scripture that redeem and heal the brokenness caused by that first one. Throughout this Lenten season, we'll focus on some of these meals, particularly the ones attended and hosted by Jesus, the living, incarnate Bread of Life, and we'll explore how our own practices of receiving and extending hospitality and table fellowship can form us as individuals and a community. Most importantly, though, we'll listen for the divine call inviting each of us to take our place and eat well at God's table of overflowing abundance and love.

The meal we're starting off with today, though, occurred around 2000 years before Jesus was born into our world, and it probably didn't involve a table. It was set under the great oak trees of Mamre in the Middle Eastern wilderness, near the modern Palestinian city of Hebron in the West Bank. Abraham and his family were camping there because God had called them out of their native country and led them away from their own people into the unknown, promising that Abraham and his wife Sarah would become a great nation and be a blessing to all the peoples on the earth.

At the time of this meal, however, it was hard to see how those promises could come to fruition. Years had passed, and despite God's insistence that Sarah would bear a son, she remained barren and was now post-menopausal. When we pick up the story in Genesis 18, Abraham was resting under a tree at noonday, when he looked up and saw that three strangers had appeared. He immediately jumped up and rushed out to meet them, imploring them to come, sit down, and be refreshed with "a little water" and "something to eat."

This kind of welcome is pretty countercultural in our day and age. I've seen strangers walking by my house, and I've never even considered bursting out and beseeching them to come in and refresh themselves while I make a meal for them. But in Abraham's nomadic culture, this was normative hospitality. Strangers traveling through the desert were both vulnerable and potential bearers of news from the outside, and to *not* offer them food and shelter would disgrace your household.

However, even though welcoming strangers was customary, the details in this passage show that Abraham and Sarah's hospitality went above and beyond what was necessary. Abraham, a wealthy and respected man, *ran* to meet them, he bowed down and called them "lord," and the humble "something to eat" he promised became a feast. A young calf, "choice and tender," – in other words, the best that Abraham had, was slaughtered and cooked with the help of his servants; yogurt and fresh milk were brought out; and Sarah made bread using three *seahs* of the finest flour – the equivalent of 5 or 6 five-pound bags. While Abraham stood near and served them, these three visitors ate emphatically well – they definitely had plenty of meat!

And here's where things get a little strange. Travelers receiving hospitality were expected to share news they had picked up on their journeys and bless the household serving them, but just like Abraham showed lavish hospitality, these strangers went above and beyond in fulfilling their obligation. If you continue reading Genesis 18, past the point at which we stopped today, you'll hear the visitors ask where Abraham's wife Sarah is. When he tells them that she's in the tent, one of them shares an extraordinary piece of news: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son" (Genesis 18:10).

Wait – who were those strangers, anyway? If you look backwards through the passage, you'll find ambiguity. Genesis 18:2 says that Abraham saw "three men," and it was men in the plural who sat and ate; but when Abraham addressed them, it was in the singular: "my lord." Genesis 19:1 names two of these strangers as "angels." And strangest of all, Genesis 18:1 says that "the LORD" appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre; and after announcing Sarah's imminent pregnancy, the mystery speaker again becomes "the LORD" in verse 13.

Although they didn't see it at first, by welcoming the strangers with openness and abundant hospitality, Abraham and Sarah welcomed the divine into their home, and God lavished them not only with God's presence, but with news of unbelievable, almost painful hope and joy (so incredible, in fact, that Sarah's first reaction was bitter laughter): that Sarah would be a mother within a year's time. And indeed, the amazing news came true – Isaac, named “laughter”, was born to Sarah, exactly at the time God promised (Gen. 21:1-7).

Up on the screen¹ is a famous icon created by the Russian painter Andrei Rublev in the early 15th century, and it's considered one of the highest achievements of Russian art. It depicts the strangers visiting Abraham and Sarah in Mamre, and although it's titled *The Hospitality of Abraham*, it doesn't show either Abraham or Sarah. Instead, it depicts the three men as members of the Trinity: God the Father on the left, God the Son in the center, and God the Holy Spirit on the right. One of the most beautiful things about this icon is the way the three figures are leaning and inclining their heads towards each other, creating a circular movement of divine love given and divine love received. But it's not a closed circle – it's open towards the unseen person who is hosting and serving these visitors – there's a place for them at the table, and they are invited to enter the never-ceasing dance of divine love. In Rublev's icon, Abraham's hospitality towards strangers is transformed into the open and invitational hospitality of God towards him; the table Abraham and Sarah provide becomes a table of divine blessing.

So what do we make of this strange story of hospitality, divinity, and blessing at the table? What does it mean for us? Is it possible that when we open up our space, our table, and our hearts to the stranger, we might end up surprised by God? Jesus and the New Testament writers certainly seem to think so. The author of Hebrews alludes to this story in 13:2 – “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” And in his parable in Matthew 25:35 and 40, Jesus himself says, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me in...truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

The Greek word Jesus uses for stranger in his parable is *xenos*, and it literally means foreigner, or alien: “a person who comes from a foreign country who

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trinity_%28Andrei_Rublev%29#/media/File:Angelsatmamre-trinity-rublev-1410.jpg

does not owe allegiance to your country; frequently someone who does not speak one's native tongue." And the word hospitality in Hebrews 13:2 is *philoxenia* – love of the foreigner, love of the stranger. We tend to think about hospitality as inviting people we already know into our homes and spaces. But Biblical hospitality means reaching out to foreigners and outsiders and transforming them from strangers into honored guests.

It's impossible for me to read these passages and not see an invitation and a promise in them – the promise that in opening our hearts, spaces, and tables to the stranger, the foreigner, the other, the person who seems completely unlike us, we open ourselves up to hosting God, to being surprised by God, to receiving an unexpected blessing from God that changes us, to being drawn deeper into the Trinity's never-ceasing dance of divine love. There are some commentators that believe that because Abraham and Sarah were so hospitable, God rewarded them with the blessing of a miracle baby. I don't agree, because I don't think God's blessings are simple rewards for good behavior. If Abraham and Sarah had ignored the strangers and let them pass on by, I don't believe God would have cut them off and refused to bless them ever again. But I do think they would have missed out on the opportunity to see and know God in a special way, and they would have missed the opportunity to receive what God wanted to give them at the table.

And I believe that when we ignore the foreigners and strangers and outsiders and strangers among us, when we aren't intentional about welcoming and including and trusting and sharing our table with them, we don't exclude ourselves from God's blessing, but we do miss out on opportunities to be drawn more deeply and fully into the life and love God intends for us.

While I was getting my MDiv at Seattle Pacific, I regularly commuted there via ferry and bus. On my way home, the bus dropped me off on 3rd Avenue in downtown Seattle 10 to 15 minutes before nearest ferry departure, and I usually had to run down the hill to catch it. One day, as I impatiently waited at a red light, I looked across the intersection and saw an older man, a stranger, disheveled and probably unhoused, looking towards me and waving his arms over his head. I instinctually waved back at him, just as the light turned green. He watched me as I crossed the street, and as soon as I reached him, he held out both hands to me, and I found myself reaching out to grasp them. He immediately started praying for me, a loud fervent prayer that God would protect me from evil and shower me with goodness. He finished his prayer,

gave me an enormous smile, and I thanked him and ran on to catch the ferry, knowing from my head to my toes that I had been surprised and blessed by God. If I hadn't made the decision to open my arms and heart and welcome that man's outstretched hands into my own, if I had let the "otherness" of him turn me away, I would have missed out. And I wonder: by not lingering, by running on towards the ferry, did I miss anything else?

So what does it look like to open our hearts, our spaces, and our tables to the stranger? For some of us, it might mean inviting those we don't yet know into our homes and serving them food, like Abraham did; and if you sense God nudging you to do that, I encourage you to try it at least once this Lenten season. But not all of us have the space or the resources to do that – even Abraham had a spouse and a whole crew of servants helping him. Hospitality is a communal effort.

And this church is a community. We open our doors to all people every Sunday, and each of us here has an opportunity to show hospitality to those we don't yet know – by inviting them to sit at our tables during coffee hour, stopping to ask questions or chat, inviting them to events or get-togethers outside of church. Maybe you could commit to intentionally greeting, sitting with, or talking to one person you don't know well each Sunday this Lent.

Our daycare opening is so close, and I pray that we can find many ways of welcoming its new families into our space and our tables and our lives. Just like Abraham got up and hurried towards the visitors he saw, imploring them to come and stay for a meal, it's going to take initiative and determination on our parts to host those families upstairs as well as downstairs. It won't just happen, and we might have to change or adjust how we do things or how our space gets used. But I believe that if we commit to welcoming the strangers who will soon be filling our basement, it will be life-giving and transformative to us, and we'll see God in new ways in this community.

Finally, I can't preach about welcoming the stranger to our tables without talking about how our country is treating strangers right now: immigrants and refugees and people who look or sound foreign or "other." Remember, the Greek word for the hospitality that Abraham showed, the hospitality God calls us to in the New Testament, is *philoxenia*, love of the foreigner. The opposite of *philoxenia* is *xenophobia*, fear of the foreigner, and it's a fear afflicting much of our nation right now. Even though data consistently show that undocumented

immigrants commit crimes at a significantly lower rate than native born citizens,² there are powerful false narratives that paint refugees and migrants as dangerous criminals who want to hurt us. And too often, we who make up the American church, the people throughout this nation who claim to be followers of Jesus, we listen to that false narrative instead of God's word, and we treat the strangers among us as criminals rather than honored guests.

And when this happens, we don't just turn our backs on the clear call of God to welcome and care for the *xenos*, the stranger and foreigner; we miss out on an opportunity to host God, to serve Jesus, to receive the blessing God brings when we share a table together. So perhaps, this Lenten season, open your eyes to see the people in your daily life who might be strangers in this country. Be intentional about greeting them, and let them know that they are welcome. Advocate for them. Be open to ways you might be able to invite them into your heart or your space or even your table. You might end up hosting God.

I want to close my sermon by inviting us to look again at this icon, the Hospitality of Abraham. An icon is more than a picture – it's created to be a window through which we can see a glimpse of heaven, entering into the spiritual reality it hints at. As we gaze at this icon, we're invited to take our place in that open spot at the table, to enter into the circle of trinitarian love.

But I want to argue that it's not only painting that can be icons. When we reach out in love to welcome and host the stranger, when we include them at our table, where everybody belongs and everybody is eating well, that abundant table and those who sit around it become an icon, a window into heaven and a glimpse into the heart of God with us. May we all get to experience a taste of that this holy season. Amen.

² <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/debunking-myth-migrant-crime-wave>,
<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/debunking-myth-immigrants-and-crime/>,
https://www.policinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Appendix-D_0.pdf