

# “Future Unfolding”

June 15, 2008

Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15; Matthew 9:35-10:8

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The stories of Abraham and Sarah offer a window into the nature of the relationship between God and Israel. And one thing that stands out above all else, I think, is skepticism. Abraham and Sarah are leery of this puzzling God who insists on invading their lives with promises that seem beyond all possibility.

Now Sarah and Abraham were good people. They lived a peaceful life with their household, their servants and hands and some extended family. It was a comfortable life and fairly prosperous. But they did have one nagging regret. They were unable to have children. Abraham was troubled, we find in the course of his conversations with God, that his only heir was his nephew Lot. In a world where a person's worth was often measured by succeeding generations, Abraham realized that he would leave no one behind to value him. In that world he and Sarah had no future.

So it's not hard to understand why they would respond so willingly to a promise of land and heirs. But by the time we reach the scene at the oaks of Mamre, it had been years since that promise was made. So many years, in fact, that for Sarah the whole thing had become sort of a joke. Later in their story their impatience would get the better of them and Sarah would try to force God's hand through her maidservant Hagar. But this future is not something they can take into their own hands. God has determined to build a nation and nations upon nations from this couple. Their future together is God's interest and no alternative will suffice.

But that future is a long time coming. And it seems from where Abraham and Sarah sit that it will never unfold. Their story isn't just one of formation; it's also meant to be instructive for later generations who would also find themselves on the brink of hopelessness, find themselves wondering if they have no future.

Over and over, in these stories and in other encounters between God and God's people we discover that despair and hopelessness are unavoidable realities on the path of God's unfolding future. As Walter Brueggemann, in his commentary on Genesis points out, that is made most clear to us at Gethsemane where Jesus asks that God remove this cup he's about to take. The cross is unavoidable; despair, suffering, barrenness are unavoidable.

That's a hard word to take for a culture like ours, a culture committed to the avoidance of pain at all costs. And there are many Christian soothsayers who would sell us the bill of goods that truly faithful people never experience hopelessness or despair. I was interested a few months ago at the number of folks, inside as well as outside the Church, who were so stunned by the revelations of the angst Mother Theresa experienced in her spiritual journey. I suppose they thought faith was an inoculation for that sort of thing.

The reality, of course, is faith not only can't prevent such experiences, but in some ways it may actually deepen them, make them more acute. For we see the contrast between God's promised future and our present reality. We know that what we see is nothing like what God intends.

I wonder if it's that contrast that prompts Jesus to react so viscerally to the suffering and illness he sees in the crowds. Our translation as "compassion" of this passage from Matthew can't really do justice to the meaning of the word in Greek which is better thought of as "gut-wrenching" or "stomach-turning." He sees their condition and he's turned inside out for love of them. Don't think of this so much as how you feel when you see some nameless homeless person. Think of it as how you would feel to see your own child sleeping under a bridge or in a doorway. That's the reaction Jesus has.

He knows God intends something very different for us. God intends healing and forgiveness and compassion. And that's what Jesus sends his Twelve out to demonstrate. They become God's future unfolding. Now I know we can quibble over why Jesus sends them only to Judean villages and not to Samaritan or Gentile ones. But think of it as tossing a stone into a pond. The ripples move outward inexorably. What happens in the center is felt throughout. Wherever this free sharing of the Kingdom begins it will be noticed, in time, everywhere.

They are the bearers of God's future. They're told to proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." And then they are to live it: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." Now there's certainly room for debate over what those things really mean, we can think of them literally or metaphorically, but the point is something new is breaking in on the world. A veil is being lifted, a window opened. And through it God's kingdom is being revealed. The future is unfolding.

And it's a future that continues to unfold today through us. We are God's future unfolding just as surely as Abraham and Sarah or as Jesus' Twelve were. Now that means several things. First, it means we live under the shadow of knowing how far we are from God's desires for us. And at times that will drive us to despair. We'll become frustrated and anxious. Not because we're unfaithful but because we want so deeply for God's kingdom to emerge.

But it also means we have a voice and a message to proclaim. In the face of so much that is unjust, in the midst of homelessness and hunger and desperate poverty, we can offer an alternative vision. As a congregation, as North Presbyterian Church, we can offer a vision of God's kingdom come near. That's why we gather to sing and pray and share. We are here to be equipped. I was reminded the other night that God doesn't call the equipped, but equips the called. In our worship we encounter the One who calls us. We are molded, in our spirits and in our ways of living, in the image of Christ.

And finally, being God's future unfolding means we live that future. Whether it's through volunteering at a soup kitchen, or helping resettle refugees, or building houses with Habitat; whether it's sharing music or dance in worship, or teaching a class, or serving as a liturgist; whether it's serving on a committee, or providing pastoral care, or praying on behalf of those in need, whatever it is you might do in the life of this church you are bringing God's future to life. You are curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, casting out demons.

It's happening right now, right here: God's future unfolding before us. And not even our own skepticism, not even our own fears can thwart it. We are God's future. For God has called us and put a claim on us. Put your trust in that alone and the future will be revealed.

Amen