

Is Anything Too Wonderful?

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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For the last two Sundays before we head into our summer schedule, I want to focus on the OT lectionary readings from the book of Genesis.

This week, as we've heard, it's the story of the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. Next week, it's the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael.

These are both odd stories in their own ways. Neither story fits well with our modern assumptions about how things are supposed to work. Both stories likely leave us scratching our heads for various reasons.

And both stories reveal important truths about how God works in the world, truths that we perhaps find easy to forget or ignore.

Before we get to the story, I want to begin by telling two other odd stories from my own life over the last few weeks.

As I feel like I must nearly every Sunday, I'm going to have to ask for your patience in advance. You will almost certainly wonder what on earth these two stories have to do with this morning's text.

I tell these two stories because I think that they both, in their own ways, illustrate the distance we must travel to move from our cultural location with its expectations and assumptions to the world of Genesis and of Abraham and Sarah.

In many ways, we live in completely different worlds, and I think part of recognizing how the ancient words of Scripture might speak to us today is recognizing this.

The first story comes from two Sundays ago. It was around 8:30 when I showed up. I rounded the corner and saw a hawk perched on top of the church sign.

“Well, that’s something,” I thought. And I dutifully took out my phone to take a picture.

A closer inspection, however, revealed a less photogenic image than I had hoped. There was a long stringy thread of entrails hanging from the hawk’s talons, swinging in front of the sign, perilously close to the words “Pastor Ryan Dueck.”

I stared at the hawk for a few minutes. It was an impressive-looking creature. I’m not sure I have ever seen one so up close and personal before. The hawk stared back, clearly not particularly interested in, or intimidated by my presence.

It was a memorable sight, but I had taken my picture. Time to move on.

I yelled at it to get lost. Nothing. I waved my arms. Nothing. Just a steely gaze in my direction. I was getting annoyed. I couldn’t very well leave this grisly scene undisturbed.

I waved and yelled and clapped my hands as loud as I could. Eventually, the hawk flew away, its unfortunate prey locked in its grasp, innards swinging far below.

I went inside, sat down at my desk, and jokingly texted the picture to my brother along with the caption: “What do you think?? Omen??”

He texted back: “The hawk is an omen of war.”

I squirmed at the thought of the peace dove on our church sign and this hawk menacing it from above.

Well, there was nothing particularly ominous or threatening about the worship service that followed my hawk sighting. It was a lovely service. I put the hawk out of my mind and enjoyed the rest of the day.

The second story took place around a fire a few weeks ago. A friend shared a story about a conversation that took place at work.

Their co-worker was talking about an upcoming conference on the paranormal that they were interested in. This led to another co-worker telling the story of something that had recently happened with her and her fiancé.

They were sitting in the living room, watching TV. An ordinary evening. But suddenly, the lamp started going on and off.

Her fiancé's eyes started watering and he began to speak about an "energy" in the room. It was like something, or someone was present, turning the lights on and off. He said it seemed like a "friend" or "someone he knew" was in the room.

Almost immediately, his friend phoned with the news that his dad (who was relatively young) had had a heart attack and was in a coma.

This person (the co-worker's fiancé) sensed that his friend's dad was already dead, and wondered if he was in the living room.

The next morning, he found out that his friend's dad was, indeed, dead and had been at the moment of the strange experience with the lights.

This kind of thing has been happening to him since he was seven years old, apparently. His eyes water, he senses an energy or presence in the room. He doesn't communicate with it, but he gets impressions of anger, sadness, joy.

He doesn't seek out these experiences, they just come upon him.

Well. This one we likely find a bit more unsettling than a hawk on a sign.

But it led to a lively conversation around the fire. All of us were Christians, all of us around mid-life, all of us kind of settled in our assumptions, all of us perhaps not expecting terribly much by way of supernatural interventions or mysterious occurrences in our lives.

The story provoked some interesting questions:

- Do you think these kinds of experiences make contact with something real?
- Can the dead *actually* communicate with the living?
- Was this an instance of something more nefarious from the spiritual realm, perhaps even something demonic?

- *What does it mean?*

In his really big and really important book called *A Secular Age*, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor talks about how among the defining features of our time is what he calls “the buffered self.”

This is a term he uses to describe the idea that we see ourselves as autonomous, not vulnerable to mysterious outside forces.

There’s the material world, and there’s human beings that use their brains to try to control and manage and manipulate it, but that’s about it.

This has not always been so.

For the overwhelming majority of human history (and in most parts of the world *today* that aren’t “the West”), human beings believed that there was an unseen spiritual realm where forces could act upon human beings, for good or ill.

Good and evil made their way in the world in all kinds of bizarre ways. The world was charged with the supernatural.

Mysterious visitors could be angelic beings or the Lord himself (as in our text from Genesis 18).

Animals could be agents of spiritual significance (temptation, rebuke, sustenance, etc.). We might think of the serpent of Genesis 3, Balaam’s donkey in Numbers 22, or the ravens that tended to Elijah in 1 Kings 17.

Few of us today—at least in the West—imagine that we live in this kind of a world. I don’t, at any rate.

Upon encountering the hawk on Sunday morning, my first thought was *not*, “Hmm, I wonder what grim tidings this creature announces?” It was, “Eww, gross. Go away. And don’t get any guts on my sign, because that would be annoying to have to clean in my nice clothes.”

And listening to my friend’s story, my first reaction was not to get nervous that the dead were going to migrate over to my living room, but “I wonder what they were smoking.”

I simply do not inhabit a world where hawks speak to human beings or dead people communicate with the living by turning lights on and off.

In this, my assumptions are more secular than I would often care to admit. The world I live in, even as a Christian, is a disenchanting world.

So, from our world we travel to the ancient, much more enchanted world of the Bible.

Three strange visitors approach Abraham under the oaks of Mamre. Who are they? We're not told.

The Jewish Talmud identifies them as three angels.

Some Christian interpreters have pondered the possibility that it was an early appearance of the Trinity (the 15th century Russian artist Andrei Rublev is probably the most famous example here—he created one of the most famous icons in Christian history based on this scene. It's called "The Trinity").

Nobody really knows. All we can glean from the text itself is that these three visitors somehow represented an appearance of the Lord.

And what is the purpose of this divine visitation? Well, it is to follow up on a certain promise that God made to Abraham back in Genesis 12.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing (Gen 12:2).

But some time had passed. And no great nation seemed to be materializing. Abraham and Sarah remained childless.

Indeed, they had even decided to take matters into their own hands, using Hagar, their servant girl, to kind of get the ball rolling, as it were.

(More on Hagar next week)

Abraham and Sarah are old now. They are worn out and weary. They are perhaps resigned to the fact that whatever that promise meant, it's not what they thought it did.

One of the three mysterious visitors says to Abraham, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Sarah overhears and laughs. *At this age? That's a good one.*

In her reaction, Sarah reveals herself to be not so different than us. It's impossible, of course. A woman her age? A man Abraham's age? That's just not how things work.

The Lord rebukes her for this response. And the rebuke comes in the form of a question. A question that is in a sense that anchor of the whole passage, and which I have been pondering all week.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Most translations don't go with "wonderful" here. Most translate the Hebrew word as "difficult" or "hard" or "impossible."

As is often the case, there is a range of meanings in the Hebrew word and translators have to choose.

But I like "wonderful." It reminds us that God is not just a being that can do really hard things that human beings can't (although this is true).

God is also a being that can do things that are better and more beautiful and wondrous and marvellous than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

God isn't just a really, really skillful engineer who can solve difficult problems (like human biology). He's also an artist, or a poet who can bring beauty and possibility into the world.

One commentator I read this week talked about how many in our time believe in "a tame and innocuous divinity," and of a default faith,

that doesn't have any expectation that God will meddle in human affairs, intercede in your life, providentially guide human history, care for a loved one, heal the hurts we suffer, or—God forbid—do the impossible.¹

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Sarah did what most of us would have done. She laughed. And so, this commentator said, "God rebuked Sarah for her timid faith in a tiny god."

But the rebuke doesn't last long in the narrative. In a few short chapters, Isaac is born, the child of the promise. Isaac, which means "He laughs."

Sarah's words at the end of our passage highlight the distance she has travelled in her understanding: "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me (Gen 21:6)"

The laughter of bitter cynicism has turned into the laughter of unexpected joy.

Earlier I said that my *first* thought in both cases was to dismiss. Hawks don't bring messages and dead people don't turn lights on and off.

But my *second* thought in both cases was, "Hmm, I wonder if I should be a bit more open to possibility than I typically am. The world is a weird place, after all. And God has a history of getting through to people in all kinds of strange ways. What if there were something I should be paying attention to here?"

The morning after the hawk sighting, I was off to the jail. I was delivering some things to the women's unit and one of the guards asked if I had time to speak to an inmate. Sure, of course.

Her eyes were red and her gaze shifty as we sat down to chat. "Do you, like, pray and stuff?" she asked. "Of course, what can I pray for?" She shuffled her feet. "Well, I've been hearing voices at night... I can't sleep. Some of the other girls hear the same. It's a kid, crying out, asking for its mother, saying, stop, leave me alone, help me."

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3581>

There are all kinds of “disenchanted” explanations for an experience like this. Childhood trauma. The guilt of being separated from children in prison. The effects of coming off hard drugs. Any or all of these could have been going on.

But I thought of that hawk glaring at me the day before, some poor creature dangling on its hooks. I thought of the comparison between this predator and the many children in our world who suffer because there is no one to protect or guide or shelter them from those who would do them harm, whose lives dangle precariously, hanging by a thread.

Perhaps God was giving me an image, a reminder of the evil things in our world that always require our faithful prayer and engagement.

Perhaps God was giving me an ugly and uncomfortable visual for how many women in our world feel as their children are mistreated by those who should love and care for them.

I prayed with this woman. We prayed that God would go to war. We prayed that the God of Heaven and Earth would work, supernaturally and through his people to rescue, protect, defend.

And our fireside conversation about the paranormal? Well, I confess I really don’t know what to do with that.

It’s unsettling to me. I don’t discount the presence of some spiritual reality that is less than friendly.

But what if God could use even bizarre and unsettling experiences like this to get a foot in the secular door, so to speak? To remind a disenchanted and weary and skeptical age that there are stranger things in our world than our theologies and our assumptions and expectations often allow.

(If you want to read an excellent book on the reality of supernatural experience in a skeptical age, I recommend Dale Allison’s *Encountering Mystery*.)

In neither case do I have any proof that God was communicating to me. In both cases, there was just a crack. Just a “what if?” Just a “Don’t necessarily instantly move to dismiss, to rationalize, to compartmentalize and explain away.”

Here's what I do believe. The implied answer to the Lord's question to Sarah is obvious.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? Is anything too difficult, too hard, too impossible?

Answer: no.

There is no situation—in your story or my story or the story of the world—so bleak, so resigned or weary, so used up and out of hope, that God cannot use it to fashion wonder or beauty,

There is nothing that God cannot take as the raw material to keep on working out his promise to bless and to deliver.

That's the other thing that I believe. God keeps his promises. Even if these things seem to take a long, long, time. Even if we only get hints and glimpses here and there.

I think that as Christians we have a duty to remain open. Open to the possibility that God's categories stretch far beyond ours. That there are possibilities for our world and for our lives and for the future that our imaginations can scarcely conceive.

Thank God, we are not children of a "tame and innocuous divinity that never meddles in human affairs."

God has, of course, meddled in human affairs decisively and most surprisingly in Jesus of Nazareth. In the person and work of Jesus Christ, it is revealed most fully and finally that there is indeed nothing too wonderful for God.

What could be more wonderful than a God who takes on our burdens and our sin, who heals and forgives the world he loves, and who holds out the promise of new life, here and in the life to come?

So, let's remain open to wonder, shall we? For Christ's sake.

Amen.

