



Hosting God

Genesis 18:1-15

It is very common for the people of different cultures to call themselves hospitable. I have heard many speak with pride of their character of serving guests wholeheartedly. In general, people feel there is something special in their character of serving guests and accommodating them in good form. What is perhaps not as easily recognized is the fact that the great majority of cultures feel themselves very hospitable, as though only they know how to be good hosts. We ignore that patterns of receiving guests vary much from one culture to the next, and that the majority of cultures prize hospitality toward guests as a mark of honor. We ignore as well, that we are wont to host some and ignore others. Before hosting, we determine who is worthy or not of our efforts and resources.

In the Ancient Near East, the manner of dealing with visitors was recognized as very important in relation to obeying the gods and in defining the quality of one's righteousness. Treating strangers well, along with widows and orphans was a refrain cited to measure one's personal righteousness. It was integral to the definition of what it meant to be just and was expected of the gods as well as of people. This does not mean that the people were definitively very welcoming and hospitable, but they maintained this as an ideal. It was in this context that Abraham came to receive the three men who arrived before his tents. He saw in their approach the chance to offer acceptance and provision for some who could not count on protection within the local systems of justice.

On seeing the three men arrive, Abraham ran to receive them and offer them of his generosity and provision for their needs. According to norms of hospitality, he offered them essential things the travelers needed, but then went on to provide them with much more than what he had officially offered. He promised little, but delivered much.

The text tells us that he spoke with Sarah, asking her to make bread from some 45 pounds of flour. With this as the stated measure, he would have been asking for the equivalent of some forty large loaves, enough to feed many people, much more than the three mentioned in the text. These three probably traveled as part of a larger group which would include numerous servants. The bread would be served along with meat, which was in that day a very special provision. The people of his day did not eat meat, except on special occasions. Along with the young calf that Abraham had asked to be prepared, he served the visitors milk and butter along with the bread. He then placed himself to serve as a slave at the table of his master, not as the host giving orders to his many servants.

Abraham expected to serve his guests graciously. He recognized them as special and powerful people, but he still did not understand well who they were. He simply knew that they were visitors and he had the opportunity to serve them wholeheartedly. They were much more than Abraham expected. It was not until the end of their visit, however, that Abraham came to understand who he was serving. Prior to that, they had asked about his wife and declared that she would have a son within a year.

How strange for a visitor to involve himself in such a way in personal affairs! The fact that Sarah did not have a son was not so big a secret, as one would expect Abraham to have presented his sons before the delegation of visitors. Without this presentation, it would be recognized that Abraham had no son to present. What was strange was the fact of the visitors' comment. On asking about her, one of the three mentioned that within a year she would have given birth to the son she had so longed for. It was

obvious that Abraham was already advanced in years. Simple logic would consider he had been married from some time. Without a son to show his visitors, Abraham and Sarah obviously had problems with fertility. This was no topic for the visitors to bring up in jest or in sincerity.

God had already promised Sarah a son, but neither she nor Abraham had become accustomed to the idea. They did not yet believe it would be truly possible for them to have a son of their own. God had spoken with Abraham of the same, but neither he nor she had accepted the idea. The promise felt to them like a joke, a joke in very bad taste. It was as though one looked at their sores and filled them with salt. This was not, however, just a simple comment. It was no joke. It was a promise, as the word of a prophet who announced the will and plan of God.

Abraham had proved his righteousness in receiving these travelers he found in need. Abraham had offered them provision in abundance, expecting nothing in return. He did not take advantage of the event to seek personal gain from these men without power and position in that region. They were travelers one supposed would not be returning through the region. He saw a need and went to meet it. It was not something that cost him much. From among his flocks and herds, one animal to serve these visitors was little. The milk and butter, bread and water were not much, either. At the same time, he demonstrated his concern for others, not simply for himself.

It was under this backdrop that God's promise came to Abraham and Sarah. It was not payment for the food offered. God had already promised the son. The word came as a reminder of the promise God had already given. At the same time, it was necessary for them to hear the promise as for the first time. This, for they had not accepted the word of promise the first time.

When the news is too good, it may be hard to accept it as real. As times it is simpler to accept the news of some disaster or other, as the horrible earthquake in Chile this week. It is harder to trust in a good promise when we feel that the promise might not come true. Accepting the promise includes trusting in the solution being offered. It includes allowing our own hope to grow in expectation and anticipation. It includes making ourselves vulnerable to the promise offered.

It is like accepting being another's guest. We don't know how we will be treated. It may be that one thing is said and another done. As with Abraham, what is offered to meet our needs may be more than sufficient. It may be that the provision would not be enough. While Abraham was hosting God, Abraham was in control of the situation. It was Abraham who made decisions of what and how to serve. It was Abraham who decided to what point he would offer his goods and resources to provide for his visitors. Accepting God's offering, however, placed the decisions and power in God's hands.

Perhaps it is difficult for us to give God our all. Perhaps it is hard to let go of all the resources under our control to entrust them in faithfulness to God. At the same time, it may be that serving others would be the simpler part for us. It could be that we find a missing sense of control in serving others. However, it is not to give us control that God calls us and come to visit. God come asking that we give up control of our lives, resting like the visitors who arrive at our doors, depending on the service and offering of others. Are we ready to become God's guests, or do we feel in necessary to measure our worth through serving, remaining in control of the situation?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*