

“Surprising Grace in the Heat of the Day”
June 15, 2008

Romans 5:1-5
Genesis 18:1-15

In the heat of the day, Abraham was sitting by the tent flap, and Sarah was within the tent. And it was then that God appeared.

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Especially with our little heat wave last week, this has been for me an especially arresting image from a very, very old story. Thanks in part to our own hot, dry, sunny weather last week, it's been easy to imagine a hot, dry, relentlessly sunny afternoon along the terebinth trees of Mamre and to imagine Abraham and Sarah's tent, with the tents of their extended family and servants spread around them. And it's been easy to relate to Abraham, sitting, shaded, at the entrance to the tent and to Sarah, inside the tent, seeking relief from the sun and its rising heat.

As I think about Abraham and Sarah on that hot afternoon, I imagine, first, that they've had a good day, that things in general have been going well. There's been enough food, water, and wine for everyone, and both the people and the livestock have been staying healthy and strong. Still, though, even in the midst of a good day or a relatively easy stretch of our lives, the scorching heat of a day can take on a life of its own, slowing our bodies and our minds. So I imagine Abraham and Sarah in the heat of that day, simply waiting out the worst of the heat before they can get on with whatever lies ahead of them.

And as I thought about Abraham and Sarah, lying low, waiting for something to change before they got on with their day, I started to realize how easy it is for many of us (maybe most or even all of us) to fall into a similar pattern in our own lives.

Last week, when the meteorologists were predicting high temperatures around 100 degrees, I found myself postponing little things here and there, some grocery shopping, some work in the yard, some unpacking and organizing in our new home. In the heat of the day, I did my own version of hanging back in the tent, waiting for something to change before I got on with things.

But we can have longer, more difficult periods when we try to stay hidden and protected in some kind of tent in our lives. A dear friend of mine from Alcoholics Anonymous describes his last, worst months of drinking and drugging in similar imagery. He said he would hide in his apartment, stand at the window, mostly hidden by the curtains, and watch the world go by. He didn't feel as though he was a part of that world going by – he was afraid to be – and he said he was waiting for something to change, waiting for something to be different before he'd leave his apartment. He kept waiting and waiting, hoping that the miserable heat of his drug abuse and alcoholism would one day ease off, so that he'd finally be able to rejoin the world.

Well, my friend Dave was willing to keep waiting for something to change, but his girlfriend wasn't. She'd had enough and wasn't going to wait any longer. And on the day she told Dave that her waiting-for-him days were over, his girlfriend (who is now his wife and the mother of their two children) surprised him just as Abraham and Sarah's visitors surprised them, with a vision that seemed impossible to believe. For Abraham

and Sarah, the vision was of the birth of a son. For Dave, the vision was one of him leaving the illusion of protection in his tent, his apartment, and reaching out for help.

Like Sarah, Dave may have laughed at what seemed like the impossibility of what God offered him through his girlfriend – a clean and sober life lived in engagement with the world – but he, like Sarah, discovered that God is able to bring life and healing into the most surprising people and places.

My beloved brothers and sisters, what, if anything, drives you into your own tent to stay hidden, hoping that the heat of the day or the pain in your life will just pass on by? What prompts you to withdraw all the way into the tent with Sarah or just inside, next to the tent flap with Abraham? Is there something that's troubling you or weighing on your heart about your own life? Perhaps it's financial troubles or family conflicts or concern about someone in your family who's drinking or gambling or shopping too much. Does the pain from the death of yet another friend seem too much to bear, so that retreating to the isolation of your tent seems like the best thing to do?

Do the demands of work, family, friends, neighbors, even (or especially) church overwhelm you, so that some dark, cool hiding place has become very attractive to you? Are you worried about something personal or global – your health, the election, the economy, the wars around the world, climate change, food shortages – that seems so big that you want to hide from it all, hoping that things will be different when you're ready to come back out again? Or are you simply tired, worn out from working or worrying or just living? Don't you have days when the stress and heat of life seem like too much to handle and you need to retreat to that metaphorical tent for some rest? Tell the truth, now. Don't you have days or even months or years like that? [People raise their hands.]

So is it a bad idea to give into the impulse to retire to that tent and maybe even hide in it for a while? I don't think so. (And, I swear, I'm not saying that simply because I'm starting my vacation this week ... although there may be some connection!)

To explain why I don't think we should ignore our desire to rest in our tents, I need to return to this morning's story of Abraham and Sarah and their surprising visitors. Abraham and Sarah have sought the protection of their tent in the heat of the day because they *needed* its protection. Just as they needed protection, we, too, need places – physical, emotional, and spiritual places – where we can regain our strength, regain our bearings, and simply rest. God's commandment to keep the Sabbath day of rest holy reminds us that rest and renewal are necessary for all of life to flourish.

But notice that Abraham and Sarah *within* their tent are still able to see and hear what is going on *outside* the tent. Abraham sees that three men have come upon the encampment, and Sarah hears what one of them says about her having a son. This ancient couple have not retreated so far from the heat of the day or the rest of the world that they miss the surprises God is offering them. They have not sought the kind of protection and rest that cuts them off from the very people God may be using to bring them grace and blessings. They have sought the protection that will enable them both to get the rest that they need and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, to allow God's love to be poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit.

My friends, honor the need you feel to take a break from the heat of the day or the challenges in your life. Let yourselves find the rest and renewal that you need. But don't retreat so far into your tent that you won't be able to hear or see outside yourself. Abraham and Sarah were able to encounter the strangers who brought God's very

presence to them. Even in his isolation, my friend Dave was still able to hear his girlfriend when she had had enough of his hiding and waiting. You can take a step back in the heat of the day while still remaining attentive and open to the God who will always have the ability to surprise you with gifts of grace. Stay open not because you *should*, not because God will punish you if you don't. Stay open because, if you don't, you'll miss those gifts and your heart will not be ready to receive the in-pouring of God's love through the Holy Spirit.

I'd like to close with a story from last Friday night. I was tired. I was still recovering from being sick the last couple of weeks. I was feeling the need for the vacation that I'm about to have. I thought I needed to be disconnected from everything and everyone ... for at least the rest of the evening. It was 9:00, and I was ready to turn in especially early. And then the phone rang. Oh, I was tempted to ignore it – to let the machine answer it and listen to the message in the morning. I thought I wanted to be so far inside my tent I couldn't hear or see anything or anyone.

But something wouldn't let me ignore the phone. Something – the grace of God, perhaps – led me to answer it. It was Marie, calling to let me know about a television show that had just started. The show was "Why We Sing," about choruses: choruses made up of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and straight folks, choruses making beautiful music and being a part of God's healing transformation in this country and around the world. The show offered me exactly what I needed, which was *not* to retreat far, far into my tent, but to hear some beautiful music, to see and hear people of courage and love, and to be reminded of the power of human connectedness. I received all that because I hadn't gone so far into my tent that Marie's phone call couldn't reach me. I received all that because Marie was willing to be a bearer of God's surprising grace.

So my friends, do pitch your tents for rest during the heat of the day. Be attentive to your need to retreat and slow down. Make sure, though, that you also stay at least a little attentive to what's happening outside your tent of rest and reflection. Be open to what is happening outside, so that you, too, can receive God's gifts of surprising grace.

Amen.

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