

Fear Not: You are Needed

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- [0 : 00] Genesis 18 verses 1 to 16 on the Pew Bibles on page, starting on page 17.
- Sorry, not Pew Bibles. Shows my age. On these Bibles, starting on page 17. Genesis 18. The three visitors.
- The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.
- Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.
- He said, If I have found favour in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree.
- [1 : 15] Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way. Now that you have come to your servant.
- Very well, they answered. Do as you say. So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. Quick, he said. Get three sears of the finest flour, knead it and bake some bread.
- Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice tender calf and gave it to a servant who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them.
- While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. Where is your wife, Sarah? They asked him.
- Oh, they're in the tent, he said. Then one of them said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.
- [2 : 33] Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing.
- So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, After I am worn out, my Lord is old, and now will I have this pleasure.
- Then the Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Will I really have a child now that I am old?
- Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.
- Sarah was afraid. So she lied, and she said, I did not laugh. But he said, Yes, you did laugh.
- [3 : 39] When the men got up to leave, they looked down towards Sodom, and Abraham walked along with them to see them on their way.
- This is God's word. We are looking at these three strangers, or angels, who appear to Abraham.
- And it might seem a strange passage for Advent. Gone right back towards the start of the Bible in Genesis 18. But as we've already been talking about, the Christmas story is part of God's great story of salvation.

And there are events here that I think point towards the incarnation of God at Christmas. And there is a promise made here to Abraham and Sarah, which I think is in some ways ultimately fulfilled by the coming of the baby Jesus at Christmas.

We're also going to look at that story, as Elsa read for us earlier. And the topic, I thought the topic was Fear Not You Are Needed. So it's slightly different to Included.

[4 : 52] I think it probably means the same thing. But we're going to look at the role that we can play in inviting and welcoming divine presence at Christmas. We're going to look at some of the people who receive these divine visits, starting with Abraham, and then looking at the hospitality which is offered to the Holy Family.

So on the next slide, at Christmas God gives us an amazing gift, his son Jesus. And I really love in John 1, which I'm sure we will read over the course of the next few weeks, in the message translation it says, the word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood.

I really like that translation. And this Christmas I believe God is calling us to partner with him to make that a reality. Jesus is moving into our neighbourhood this Christmas.

How might we be ready to receive him? So in the next slide, we're firstly going to look at this visit of the strangers to Abraham in Genesis 18.

And if you still have your Bible open, or if you've got a digital version, I think it would be helpful to look at it. Because I want to just look at what happens before and after these strangers appear to Abraham.

[6 : 13] So if you look back a chapter, to chapter 17, God has appeared to Abraham. Abraham is 99 years old. I love that little detail. It's never too late to have your encounter with God.

And God has told Abraham in chapter 17 about the covenant that he will make with him. Abraham and Sarah will have a son. And through this son, God will establish an everlasting covenant with Abraham's descendants.

God says of Sarah in chapter 17, verse 16, she will be the mother of nations. Kings of people will come from her.

And it is through this bloodline that the King of Kings, the Messiah is to be born. It's the start of the Christmas story. And the events that are recalled here in Genesis have far-reaching consequences.

As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians in chapter 3, verse 29, if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.

[7 : 24] This everlasting covenant that is extended through the many, many generations and ultimately to the Gentile people through the sacrifice of Christ.

So that's what's happened in Genesis 17. God has made the promise. And then right at the start of chapter 18, God appears again. The Lord appears to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre.

And then in the very next verse, the three strangers appear. And I find it a bit confusing in Genesis 18 to find out who is addressing whom.

I don't know if you found that when you read it. In verse 3, when Abraham says, if I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not let your servant pass by.

Is he talking to God or is he talking to the three strangers? And I think actually that's quite important that it's difficult to tell. I think the message here is actually it doesn't matter because God is present with Abraham in this conversation that he's having.

[8 : 30] But he is also present to Abraham through the divine presence of the three strangers or angels. And after Abraham has offered hospitality to the strangers, they go on their way, having their last look at Sodom.

Abraham goes back to the conversation with God. And this time they're discussing the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. That's towards the end of chapter 18. So the sandwiching of this visit of the strangers in the middle of this conversation suggests that the visit of the strangers is also a divine encounter.

I think actually these stories are interwoven. They're all part of one conversation. The idea that the strangers also represent a divine encounter is reinforced in the passage by the message that the strangers bring to Sarah.

So in verse 10, I will surely return to you about this time next year and your wife Sarah will have a son. The same message that we had in Genesis 17.

And like Abraham, Sarah laughs in response to the news. It's unbelievable. And despite the laughter and the fact that they both find it unbelievable, God will keep his promise to Abraham and Sarah.

[9 : 52] If you could go to the next painting, Richard. Sorry, that? Oh yeah, thank you. This is Rembrandt's painting of this scene of Abraham meeting the angels.

I actually really love this painting. But it's interesting that Rembrandt has the angels dressed in white with wings. And they look very clean.

There's an angel extending a very clean foot. But in the passage, there are no wings or halos. These aren't an ethereal presence, but a very real one.

These are angels with dirty feet. Abraham asked for water to wash their feet. An act of hospitality that of course will be practiced by Jesus with his disciples.

And I think a message of this passage is to be ready for divine visitation. It may not come in the form that you expect. It might not look like this.

[10 : 51] And in Hebrews 13, verse 2, when Paul is writing to the Jewish Christian believers in Jerusalem, he reminds them of this. He says, Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers.

For by doing so, some have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Because there are three strangers, the passage is sometimes interpreted as a visit by God in the form of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And some angel visitations in the Old Testament are interpreted as the figure of Jesus. It reminds me of the in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

And I think it's a reminder as we approach Christmas that as well as the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus, we have these kind of suggested presences, figurative clues, which point to the incarnation of God in the birth of Jesus.

Abraham passes his test of hospitality. He offers not only basic hospitality, hot water, rest, but eventually the choice tender calf.

[12 : 06] Abraham doesn't know the strangers. They aren't of his family or kin, but he gives them the best that he has. And as a result, Abraham is blessed in return.

And what an extraordinary blessing, a son for a barren couple, and through that son, a chosen people whose descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky.

This story of an act of hospitality, bringing about the presence of God, is echoed throughout scripture. Elijah and the widow, Rahab and the spies, Boaz and Ruth, Jesus and the woman at the well, Jesus and the woman who washes his feet with her hair.

Jesus makes it clear to us later in Matthew 25. I think I've got this. Thank you. It's his last sermon before he goes to the cross. Then the king will say to those on his right, come you who are blessed by my father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you looked after me.

[13 : 31] I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink?

When did we see you, a stranger, and invite you in or needing clothes and clothed you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The king will reply, truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

Now those are hugely challenging words. I always find them challenging every time I read them. But I think with the challenge comes a promise that wherever and whenever we look after people in need, we have the presence of Jesus with us in our midst.

And I'm really encouraged by that. So now we're going to look on the next slide. We're going to look at the parallels of this story in the Christmas story that Elsa read for us early in Luke's Gospel.

I hope you can remember it. They're very familiar words. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them.

[14 : 53] One of the things I miss now my girls have grown up a bit is their participation in a nativity play. I absolutely love a nativity play. They took part in nativity plays at school, but my favourite was the mustard seed nativity play that we used to have here in the church.

And I hope you're going to forgive me for saying this, but actually one of my favourite things about nativity plays is when they go a bit wrong. The king who brings gold, frankincense, and I need a wee.

The misbehaving angel stealing a sheep from the shepherd. But my favourite nativity play mistake of all is when there's a first innkeeper because there somehow seem to be three of everything who when Mary and Joseph come calling says, welcome.

I have an en suite with a sea view. There isn't an innkeeper mentioned in Luke's account. We are only told that Jesus was placed in a manger.

And this has led to the tradition that Jesus was born in a stable, but you've probably noticed there's no stable mention. With the brown cover, if you have an old version of the NIV Bible yourself, you will see that it will say that Jesus was placed in the manger because there was no room at the inn.

[16 : 17] But if you have the new church Bible with the blue cover, it says because there was no guest room available. And that's because of a change in how biblical scholars have translated, it's on the next slide, this Greek word, kataluna.

It's previously translated as inn. And now it's thought to be better translated as reception or guest room. Luke uses the same word later in his gospel when he talks about finding a room for the Last Supper, for Jesus and his disciples.

It's the same room, guest room or reception room. And it's not the same word as is used when the Good Samaritan finds an inn to bring the man who has been injured.

Historians also tell us that the time Luke's gospel was written, animals weren't kept in separate outbuildings, but in the ground floor of people's homes and businesses.

And because of this and the change in translation, biblical scholars now think that Jesus was probably born in a family home, albeit not in the best guest room.

[17 : 30] So why does this matter? It's just a tradition. Well, I think this misunderstanding might have led us to oversee an important act of hospitality in the Christmas story.

That is the hospitality of the family or the individual or even the innkeeper who take Mary and Joseph in and allow Mary to have her baby safely under shelter.

Luke's account is full of characters who offer hospitality to Jesus. Mary, who welcomes Jesus into her womb, and Joseph, who welcomes Mary into his family.

Anna and Simeon, we will later meet who welcome Jesus in his first visit to the temple. But maybe there's a forgotten act of hospitality here.

It may not have been quite as grand a gesture as that of my rogue nativity innkeeper, but I think it speaks of someone doing the best they can in difficult circumstances.

[18 : 34] I don't know if you're having people to stay this Christmas. We're having people to stay. And I am, so we are going to do what I think of as the Christmas reshuffle.

We will move the contents of our house, the people and the furniture around into different rooms in order to make room for our guests. Well, blessed are they who move the contents of their spare room into the car to squeezing an extra guest at Christmas.

because I wonder if something similar is happening in Luke's account. It's after all the busiest day of the year in Bethlehem. Everywhere is full.

Someone reaches out with compassion on the holy family and the result of their Christmas reshuffle is the least expected and yet the most welcome guest of all, the baby Jesus, is laying in a borrowed manger.

I love how this normalizes the idea of doing what we can even if we don't think that it is enough. The manger is an imperfect solution to the problem of where to put a baby but it serves God's purposes perfectly.

[19 : 50] The inauspicious circumstances of Jesus' birth offer him protection from Herod who is certainly not looking for a newborn king in a manger. It foretells Jesus' ministry.

He will be the servant king and points towards his death. Born in a borrowed manger, he will be laid in a borrowed tomb. For my first job, I worked, I was going to say in the marketing team but it was just me, at the Castle Museum in York and one year just before Christmas, we had a little girl come to the museum with her friends to celebrate her birthday and they were going to go on a tour of the museum and afterwards they were going to go to a restaurant for the party bit.

And when they arrived, her mum told one of our guides that the restaurant had cancelled at the last minute and they had nowhere to go. And while the girl and her family and her friends were exploring the museum, our team of guides got together and they created an area in part of our cafe.

They decorated it, they went out and bought cake and candles and when the little girl came back to the cafe, she was absolutely delighted by the surprise.

And being the publicity shark that I am, when I was told about it, I called the local paper and it was a slow news day so they actually sent a reporter down and the reporter asked our museum guide, why did you go to all this trouble for people that you didn't know?

[21 : 25] And she replied, they had nowhere to go and we offered them shelter at the inn for PR gold. Made the front page of the York Evening Press the days before social media, Joseph, so that was a big thing.

I love stories like this at Christmas. I think we all love them, don't we? A simple act of kindness to strangers. And these stories have power, I think, because they have their origin in the real events of Jesus' birth recorded in Luke's gospel.

The word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood. The Christmas story is made possible because of a cast of unlikely characters who were ready to welcome him.

So Jesus is moving to Hearn Hill this Christmas. He may come as a stranger, as a lonely older person, or a homeless young person.

He will come as the person you don't know well and you have nothing to gain from looking after. And Jesus doesn't ask us to do this perfectly. It's not about good housekeeping centrepieces and matching linen.

[22 : 39] He needs us to do the best that we can with what He has given us. We don't have to do this alone. We have many acts of hospitality.

I've been reminded of that this weekend. We had an amazing act of church hospitality last night with our Christmas meal. But actually, hospitality, you don't have to be a good cook to do hospitality.

You don't have to have a place where you can host people. Actually, the Greek word for hospitality is xenophilia. It means loving the stranger.

And I think that's what hospitality is about. it's about our posture. It's about how we care for people and look after them. So we have lots of opportunities to get involved in hospitality here.

You can join a welcoming team. You could befriend our community at one of our midweek events. You could join our outreach team on the next two Saturdays as they reach out to offer hospitality in our community.

[23 : 46] Or maybe you have someone in mind. Maybe it's a neighbour or a colleague or someone who just seems a little bit on the outskirts who might need a welcome and some looking after.

And sometimes this posture of hospitality I think is about making space. Just as space was created to lie the baby Jesus in a manger. Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a banquet to which everyone is invited and the least expected people show up.

Can you budge up? Can you make space so that just one more person can enter God's kingdom? So what story of hospitality will you start in Christmas 2024 and where might that story end?

And my prayer for you and for all of us is that we might find our small part to play in God's great story. A tale of everlasting promise offered to undeserving people.

God wants to be present in our homes in our families in our communities in 2025 and I think we all want a bit of that.

[25 : 04] So Jesus is moving into the neighbourhood. Are we ready to welcome him? Thank you. Thank you.