

Today begins the season after Pentecost — affectionately referred to as “ordinary” time, because this season is about growing into the meaning of the resurrection in our ordinary lives. The journey through “ordinary” time is our longest season of the Christian year, continuing up to Advent. And today in the Gospel of Matthew we learn that ordinary time begins with a journey. It’s a particular kind of journey — a mission — and it highlights one of the key questions at the heart of Christian faith. The question is this: How is God *with* us?

It's a question that Jews & Christians have been journeying with for the better part of 4,000 years. So it’s no surprise to find that question also at the heart of Abraham’s story; the first patriarch for both Jews & Christians. The story of Abraham spans about 13 chs in Genesis or about 1/4 of the whole book. As you may already know, the story of Abraham begins with a journey. It begins in ch. 12 when God sends Abraham on a mission and one of the key questions underlying Abraham’s entire journey is the same question on our journey: how is God *with* us?

When we read Abraham’s story we find lots of dialogues between God & Abraham. Today’s story is the most personal conversation but it’s not their first conversation. In fact, there’s hardly a chapter in Abraham’s story where God isn’t speaking directly to Abraham or speaking directly to someone else on Abraham’s behalf. And if we’re not careful we can get the wrong impression from all those dialogues. Because if there’s anything unique about Abraham’s journey, it isn’t an ongoing dialogue with an ever-present divine being. What’s unique about

Abraham's journey more than anything else is the silence. And the waiting.

For Abraham, "ordinary" time was one long season of waiting. And not just weeks & months, but years & decades. Abraham first hears from God when he's 75 years old & today the fulfillment of a long-awaited promise comes 25 years after their first conversation. All the dialogues between God & Abraham packed into these 13 chapters of Genesis are like short punctuation marks at the end of long sentences. They're like the different stages of a fossil record with long, silent gaps in-between. That's the kind of relationship that grows between God & Abraham.

What Abraham hears from God in-between these long seasons of waiting is a series promises, blessings, & commitments; most of which have to do with his descendants. He receives a litany of promises that punctuate long seasons of waiting. God is *with* Abraham in the form of promises, blessings, & commitments. He tells Abraham: *I will give, I will make, I will bless*. That's how God is *with* him. *I will give you a land, I will make of you a great nation, I will bless all nations through you*. Those are the promises & blessings. What Abraham does is wait.

God invites Abraham into a lifelong relationship of trust that grows slowly over the course of a long journey. Almost all the drama & in the Abraham story is about the ways that Abraham & Sarah resist that relationship of trust; how they try to fulfill God's promises on their own by using the resources that are already *with* them. Instead of waiting for God, time & again, they try pacifying themselves with comforting actions or compulsive habits that don't really lead anywhere down the

road of God's promises & blessings; whether it's the decision to bring Abraham's nephew on the journey (even though God told him to leave his Father's house), or the decision to use Sarah's slave girl to produce a male heir. Whenever they use other resources to get ahead of God's promises, they only produce strife & grief.

The story today in Gen. 18 captures both the mystery & the reliability of the divine presence that journeyed with Abraham & Sarah. It begins as another story of Abraham trying to pacify himself with comforting actions & compulsive habits. That's what he's doing. He's rushing around, busily using all of the resources at his disposal. He's simply engaging in one more compulsive habit — only to find that God has shown up in the middle of it.

As one theologian describes it, all of a sudden the long-awaited, “announcement [about Isaac] is dropped into the midst of the drowsy luncheon like a smooth stone fallen from a great height into perfectly still water? The moment for the fulfillment of the promise, so long delayed, has come. Abraham, dumbstruck, stands rooted to the spot as the realization dawns on him that he has been entertaining God.”<sup>1</sup>

And ever since, the people of God have used this story as a model of faith; affirming that God is trustworthy and that God will do for us as God has promised. You see, just like Abraham & Sarah, “sometimes the fulfillment of God's promises [in our own lives] may be delayed until even [our best] faith ... cannot prevent [us]

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<sup>1</sup> Rutledge, *And God Spoke to Abraham*, 57.

from indulging in cynical laughter.”<sup>2</sup>

Genesis 18 invites us to avoid the temptation of pacifying ourselves with comforting actions or compulsive habits that don't really lead us anywhere in our journey with God. Because more than ever, today we live in a world where it's all too easy to avoid God's invitation into a lifelong journey of trust & intimacy by simply pacifying ourselves with habits or appetites that don't really lead anywhere. We have so many distractions at our disposal.

One of my favorite examples of the ultimate distraction is a new smartphone app called “Binky” (and yes, the icon is an image of a baby’s pacifier). The app has a single purpose. It simply exists to prove that all of our social media apps are pointless. When you open this app you’re flooded with pictures and emojis and invitations to swipe, comment, and share with friends. The irony is that none of your actions actually do anything. The app simply exists “to satisfy the appetite that you have for scrolling through stuff, without needing to worry about any of the consequences, because it's all meaningless.”<sup>3</sup> Binky may be a more recent example but people have always been willing to distract ourselves with whatever resources are at our disposal instead of joining God on a lifelong journey of intimacy & trust. Abraham is our first example.

In today’s Gospel Jesus sends his followers on a journey every bit as

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<sup>2</sup> McKeown, *Genesis*, 104.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2017/06/14/532879727/meet-binky-the-social-media-app-where-nothing-matters>

daunting as Abraham's. If Abraham journeyed to a foreign land, Jesus tells his followers to avoid foreign lands. He says, "go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel... proclaim the good news... Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons," (Matt. 10.6-8).

If Abraham brought plenty of resources when he left his father's house, Jesus tells his followers to leave every resource behind: no bag, or extra clothes, and no staff with them. He says, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." (Matt. 10:16). They don't even have the option of trusting other resources. Because the key to their journey is this: "When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time," (Matt. 10:19).

We could use this single verse to summarize the entire story of Abraham, Israel, and God's people ever since. *Do not fear; for it will be given to you at the right time.* In other words, Jesus is telling his followers the same thing God told Abraham: *I will give, I will make, I will bless.* In Jesus, God is still with us in the form of promises, blessings, & commitments; that's how God is with us. *I will give, I will make, I will bless.* We're still invited into a lifelong journey of divine intimacy & trust in the person of Jesus.

If that's true, then where is it all leading? In Romans we hear that it's leading to glory. Paul says, "we boast in our hope of sharing God's glory," (Rom. 5.2). So

we have to ask ourselves, what is glory? What does it mean? We have lots of contenders. We can turn to lots of places to find pictures of glory — celebrities, athletes, musicians, politicians; sometimes even preachers. But for Christians, we don't just look to celebrity culture to find meaning. "Jesus [himself] is the dictionary [we use to] look up the meaning of words. We look up glory, and what do we find?"<sup>4</sup> Today, we find some challenging words: *See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves* (Matt. 10:16–19). If Jesus is our dictionary, then this is what it often means to share God's glory.

Why do we do it? Why bother with a journey that leads to possible, obscurity, rejection, sacrifice, or death<sup>5</sup>? We do it for the same reason as Abraham and those first disciples. We do it because God calls us & sends us. But not just that. We do it because God is with us on our journey & sometimes our most difficult journeys are where we get to know God in a relationship of intimate trust.

God is with us, no less than God was with Abraham; no less than God was with the disciples of Jesus. God is with us in the Father who calls us into a lifelong journey of intimate trust. God is with us in the Son who sends us into the world as bearers of God's love. God is with us in the Spirit who fills us and speaks through us when we don't even have the energy or strength on our own. Whatever journey

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

you find yourself on in this world, *Do not worry, for whatever you need will be given to you at the right time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you* (cf. Matt. 10:19-20).

And finally, please, don't miss this: God is with us here and now. God is with us in the call to worship. God is with us in the feast of the Eucharist. And God is with us in our Spirit-filled community. God is with you in the Spirit-filled people beside you & alongside you on the journey of Christian faith. So if we're looking for God's glory then one of the best things we can do is simply join with fellow Christians on the journey of faith. Because God's glory is all around us today in the Spirit-filled lives of one another. That's how God is with us. Do you believe it?

*Amen.*