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January 18th: Genesis 18 & Matthew 16:13-20

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Abraham visited by the angels and interceding for Sodom; Peter confesses Christ.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis 18. And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him.

When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, O Lord, if I have found favour in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on, since you have come to your servant. So they said, Do as you have said.

And Abraham went quickly into the tent to Sarah, and said, Quick, three seers of fine flour, knead it and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to a young man who prepared it quickly. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under

the tree while they ate.

They said to him, Where is Sarah your wife? And he said, She is in the tent. The Lord said, I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son. And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years, the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, After I am worn out and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure? The Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh and say, Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son. But Sarah denied it, saying, I did not laugh.

For she was afraid. He said, No, but you did laugh. Then the men set out from there, and they looked down towards Sodom.

And Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him. Then the Lord said, Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and their sin is very grave, I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me.

And if not, I will know. So the men turned from there and went towards Sodom. But Abraham still stood before the Lord.

Then Abraham drew near and said, Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from you.

Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just? And the Lord said, If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake. Abraham answered and said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking.

Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five? And he said, I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there. Again he spoke to him and said, Suppose forty are found there. He answered, For the sake of forty, I will not do it.

Then he said, O let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there. He answered, I will not do it if I find thirty there.

He said, Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, suppose twenty are found there. He answered, For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it. Then he said, O let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once.

Suppose ten are found there. He answered, For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it. And the Lord went his way when he had finished speaking to Abraham and Abraham returned to his place.

Genesis chapter 18 is a hugely important passage in the context of the story of Abraham. Abraham has just received the covenant of circumcision, his name has been changed, Sarah has had her name changed, she's been told that her womb will be opened and that they will have a son and that this son will be the heir, not Ishmael. Chapter 18 is set by the oak of Mamre or the cherubim tree.

It's an important site. Abraham has already built an altar at this site and now he's sitting by his tent door. The tent door is an important location, it's a boundary, it's a liminal realm, a place that you must cross over from one realm to another and as such it's associated with birth, it's also associated with death.

Important things happen at doorways and we'll see this in chapters that follow. We'll see it in places like the book of Exodus where there is a threat at the doorway, where there must be marks made on the doorway. We see it at other places where there are the threats of death or the promises of birth associated with doorways.

Jephthah's daughter comes out of the door of his house first and there are other points in scripture where we see those sorts of associations. The child opens the doors of the womb as we see in Exodus chapter 13. At significant points elsewhere in scripture, birth and death are associated with the door or with crossings of things such as rivers.

These are borders that define identities and this happens at the heat of the day. It's the middle of the day and there is a situation where Abraham is resting or sitting in the tent door looking out and some visitors arrive and there's an emphasis again upon sight here. He lifts up his eyes, he looks and behold there are three references to sight in succession.

There are three men before him, he runs from the tent door to meet them, bows himself towards the ground, begs them to stay and receive his hospitality. And the theme of hospitality within this chapter and the chapter that follows is very important. In the book of Hebrews we're told about Abraham and others entertaining angels unawares.

This is the first time that we see something like that and the sort of hospitality that he provides here is juxtaposed with what we see in the chapter that follows. Sodom is a place that is devoid of true hospitality. It's a place where we see the exact opposite.

Hostility and violence and the assault upon the people who come to visit Lot and upon

Lot himself and his daughters. In these cases there is a very stark contrast to what we see in the case of Abraham. And whereas one story leads to the wife being made fruitful, the other story ends with the wife being turned into something as barren as a pillar of salt.

In the book of Ezekiel we're told that the sin of Sodom was one of lack of hospitality and the treatment of the visitors is the committing of abomination. It's not just about their sexual sin, it includes that, but there's a more general society of violent inhospitality and hostility. And this is contrasted very sharply with Abraham who's shown to be a person of great and excessive hospitality.

He takes great measures of flour that are used to make cakes. He brings a great calf and he brings all these other things to make a bountiful feast. He's showing the utmost hospitality, extreme hospitality.

Although we see hospitality being shown later on in the story of Sodom and Lot, it's hospitality of a very different type and hospitality that goes awry. The question of who the three visitors are is one that has sparked great speculation. It's not entirely clear that Abraham knows when he first encounters them.

At first he may think that they are merely human figures who are walking and needing some sort of sustenance. The idea of entertaining angels unawares is important. But we do later see that they are angels and two of those angels proceed to go to Sodom.

We're told that they are angels at that point. But we're also informed that one of these characters is the Lord himself and presumably the angel of the Lord or I believe Christ in a pre-incarnate manifestation. These angelic figures that accompany him will go on to inspect.

But there is an identity that becomes clearer of the third character. It's the Lord himself who continues to stay and talk with Abraham and addresses Sarah by name and tells of the birth to come. There's a shift after the preparation and the eating of the meal.

They say to him, where is Sarah your wife? And he said, here in the tent. And that statement, I will certainly return to you according to the time of life and behold Sarah your wife shall have a son. That shift from they to he is interesting.

There's a suggestion here that one of the visitors is not just an angel but is the angel of the Lord, the Lord himself, the angel of God who has come to declare the promise. And this is something that helps us to understand what happens later with the conversation between Abraham and the Lord. As the visitors go on, Abraham stays and talks with the Lord who remains there.

Sarah laughs when she hears that she will have a child. It's not necessarily to be taken as an example of unbelief. Even if there is an element of disbelief there, it's maybe more

characterised by astonishment and surprise than anything else.

And perhaps what's being said is that she should own that response, that she should recognise that it's an appropriate response in some ways. The child is supposed to be called after that laughter. There's something surprising and delightful and astonishing about what's taking place.

Her laughter becomes the name of her child, the defining characteristic that marks his story and what follows. His life, his very existence is a cause of laughter, not just of the laughter of unbelief but the laughter of astonishment and joy and surprise. The promise is that according to the time of life she will have a son.

It's a significant expression that we see elsewhere. For instance, in the Annunciation story of 2 Kings chapter 4 where the Shunammite woman is told that she will have a son. And that story is very similar to the story of Isaac for a reason.

We're told within a year she will have a son, the child in that story dies and there are a great many parallels with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. We'll get to that later on I think when we discuss chapter 22 of Genesis. After the announcement of the birth of the child and the laughter that will be associated with that, the men rise and look towards Sodom and move there.

Abraham goes with them to send them on the way but God has an internal dialogue as it were at this point. The Lord said, as if speaking to himself, shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him. For I have known him in order that he might command his children and his household after him.

That they keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice. That the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him. Now this suggests the reason or at least some of the reasons for God's calling of Abraham and the particular way in which Abraham will receive the promise that God has designed for him.

The means by which God will fulfil his promise to Abraham is through Abraham's ministering and keeping the way of the Lord and ministering to his children afterwards. His raising of a faithful family. That's how God will fulfil his promise to make Abraham a blessing.

Abraham is going to be an influence. He's going to raise a faithful family and through that God will pass what he has promised concerning Abraham. And all the nations will be blessed through this.

The fact that God is going to bless the nations of the world in Abraham is also something that gives an understanding of why God talks to him concerning the fate of Sodom. If Abraham is going to be a blessing to all the nations of the world then Abraham can

intercede for Sodom. He can be a blessing by speaking on behalf of a city that's about to be destroyed.

Another thing to notice here is that God is conferring with Abraham concerning what he's planning to do. Elsewhere in scripture we're told that God does not do the things that he does without conferring with his prophets. Abraham is described as a seer but also as a prophet.

He's one who is privy to the divine counsel, who enters into God's presence, hears God's designs and purposes and is able to deliberate with God concerning those things. The deliberation with Abraham here is a sign that Abraham is part and a participant in the fulfilment of God's purposes and God's plan. He's not just someone at the receiving end of God's purposes but someone who is part of deliberations concerning what God is about to do.

This is a very powerful image of what is involved in the church's prayer as we, as the children of Abraham, commune with God and seek that his will would be enacted in the world in particular ways. We interact with him and we deliberate in some ways on these issues. He's supposed to keep the way of the Lord.

Where else have we seen an expression similar to this? In reference to the cherubim who keep the way to the tree of life. Perhaps there's some connection there. God says that the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grievous.

I will go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry against it that has come to me and if not I will know. It's the expression of intent to go down and inspect the city which the two angels do which is similar to what we find in chapter 11 concerning the Tower of Babel. Let us go down and confuse their language.

Elsewhere in scripture we will see two visitors being sent to a nation or city. The angel of the Lord meets with Moses in the wilderness and then Moses and Aaron go to Egypt to test that place to see what will happen. Will they show hospitality? Will they respond? Will they let God's people go? We see in the story of Rahab a similar thing.

Two visitors sent to a city. What will be the response? Two visitors sent to the villages and cities of Israel as Christ sends out his disciples two by two. And this is a similar test to the one that Christ describes.

Will his disciples be received? If they are received they will bring a blessing. If they are not received then they shake the dust off their feet and it will be a better outcome for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that city. This passage describes what many people see as Abraham bargaining with the Lord but it is a rather strange form of bargaining.

When you bargain you usually set a figure and the person says no and then you raise the

figure and then the person says no and then maybe you present a counter figure and you gradually converge on something and you both compromise. And you will have all these expressions like I couldn't sell it for that much I'll be rubbing myself and then others you're twisting my arm and I'll maybe be able to give you this but it's my lowest price I can go. And eventually someone gives in and you feel like you've won a coup.

But that is not what happens here. It's not haggling with one party going up and the other party going down. It's a very atypical bargaining event.

Abraham is steadily going lower. He presents God with a particular number of people and then God says yes and then a lower number and God says yes and then a lower number still to which God also says yes. Lower all the way down to ten people.

And he stops at that point. Now why does he stop at ten? It's an interesting thing. First of all it's notable that God is not seeking to destroy.

God is not a God who relishes the act of destruction. He's not in the business of bringing death and destruction upon places. He wants to see them thrive and he will save it for just ten people.

Why ten people? Because those ten people will be an influence. It's a sign of hope. As long as there is a seed of faithful people there and that seed has not died, that city may not be destroyed.

Something can happen. Why ten again? Maybe because Lot has ten people within his household. When you count his daughters and his sons and his daughter's husbands or at least fiancés, you have eight people represented and then Lot and his wife, ten people.

Maybe he's thinking, oh I know Lot's family is good enough. Ten people, they have ten people. That will be enough.

God will save the place. And so it seems as if there's an end to negotiation but it also sets up the story for the next chapter. Will it be possible to bring ten people together? Does Lot have influence within the city? Can he even influence his own family? Is there in fact ten? Is Lot's family enough? And these are all key questions that drive us into the next chapter.

One concluding question for reflection, largely because I don't have a clue what the answer is but it seems significant to me. The ingredients for the meal that Abraham presents to the angels is given to us in detail. Three measures of meal, some butter, some milk and the calf.

Now I can't remember what I ate this day last week but yet we are told here about the specific ingredients of a meal that's presented to these three figures. What is the

significance of the ingredients? If you find them out, if you can think of anything, please share them with the rest of us because it would be very illuminating to know. It seems that the ingredients of the meal in the chapter that follows are important and we'll get to that tomorrow.

So what might be the significance of these details? Matthew chapter 16 verses 13 to 20. Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say that the Son of Man is? And they said, some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, but who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

And Jesus answered him, blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. Today is the feast of the confession of Peter. So we'll be taking a break from our study of John's Gospel to look at Matthew chapter 16 verses 13 to 20 in which Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

Now first of all, why do we take time out to look at a passage like this rather than just going straight through the scriptural order? One of the reasons why is because our faith is a faith that is grounded in historical events. And so having particular times of the year where we remember significant historical events within the Gospels and elsewhere is a means by which we root ourselves in cycles of remembrance, anticipation through the cycles of the year that remind us that our faith is grounded in events that happened in time and space. Our faith is based around not just abstract doctrines like justification and sanctification, adoption, glorification, but around specific occurrences in history.

And one of these important events is the confession of Peter. As we see within the Gospel, it is a turning point within the narrative. It's at this point that the narrative starts to turn away from the Galilean ministry and move towards Jerusalem.

Shortly after this, Jesus will go up with three disciples onto the Mount of Transfiguration and then descending it, he will set his face towards Jerusalem and move towards Jerusalem. If the first phase of the Gospel focused around the witness of John the Baptist and Jesus moving on from that witness into his Galilean ministry, the second stage of the Gospel takes the confession of Peter as a starting point. We see this more clearly within the Gospel of Luke where there are very manifestly two stages in Jesus' ministry.

Jesus has the first stage that is built around Galilee and begins with the theophanic event within the baptism. And then the second stage begins with the witness of Peter, the

Transfiguration, and then the movement towards Jerusalem. Now John the Baptist's witness is a crucial part of the Gospel, so much so that every single Gospel records John the Baptist.

And at a later point in Acts, we're told that to be an apostle someone had to be a witness of Christ from the beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist until the resurrection. The witness of Peter will play a similarly important role, a pivotal role, in the development of the early church. Now as Protestants we can often be nervous about the character of Peter and giving him the sort of status that Roman Catholics give him, particularly in the reading of this passage.

But yet I think as we read through the Gospel we'll see that he's given a prominence that deserves attention. As with Mary, we can often be scared of some extremes and miss what the Gospel is actually saying. There are many points within the Gospel, for instance in going to the tomb where Peter seems to be given a priority.

It will be Peter who leads the way in bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles later on. His witness plays that pivotal, crucial role in moving the Gospel out into that wider realm. Likewise for the early church, he's the one who leads the other apostles on the day of Pentecost.

He's the one who's involved in pioneering the Gospel in the land of Samaria, in the dealings with the Jewish leaders, and in various other situations until Acts chapter 12 where there is a transition point and Paul starts to take the priority. Paying close attention to the text will help us to recognise the importance of Peter as a character but will also disabuse us of some misunderstandings that we might have and extreme views. Immediately after this event, Peter has to be rebuked as Satan, get behind me Satan, because of his failure to recognise the character of Christ's mission.

He, like many others, does not understand what Christ has been called to do and that failure to understand Christ's mission leads him to make demands upon him that are characterised by misunderstanding. Likewise, we see the experience of the disciples in chapter 17 that follows where they cannot heal or drive out the demon from the young lad and Christ rebukes them for their unbelief. As he comes down the mountain, this has similarities with Moses' confrontation with Aaron after he comes down the Sinai and Aaron has failed to lead the people and has built a golden calf.

Jesus' disciples fail in key ways. Another thing to notice is that Peter is not the only one given the power to bind and loose. A couple of chapters later in chapter 18, the disciples more generally are said to have this power and so this is not something that is restricted to Peter.

Peter is the first of the disciples, the one who leads them out into the first stage of their mission, but he's not the only disciple with that authority, nor is he a disciple who

continues in that role in the longer term in certain respects. We see that it's James that really leads the council in Jerusalem. It's Paul who becomes the great apostle to the Gentiles.

So we need to be careful of giving Peter too exalted a place. So while recognizing the importance of the character, let's not exaggerate it. After he makes his confession, Jesus says that Simon should be called Peter.

Now Peter associates him with stones and rocks and Christ then goes on to say that on this rock I will build my church. Now it's interesting just a few verses later, Peter is compared to another sort of rock, a stumbling block, something that gets in the way of Christ's mission. Rather than being a foundation upon which Christ's church could be built, it's an obstacle in its way.

And so there's something ambivalent about Peter's identity or Simon's identity. Either he can be a stumbling block or he can be the rock on which things are built. Now that imagery of the rock on which things are built is something that's taken up in Ephesians.

We see it also in the book of Revelation where in the book of Ephesians in chapter 2 verse 20, the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. And Peter is the lead one of the apostles. He's the one in many respects upon which this building is erected as part of its foundation.

I believe that there's Old Testament background that helps us to understand what Jesus is saying to Peter at this point. In Isaiah chapter 22 we read the statement to Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah. In that day I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah and I will clothe him with your robe and will bind your sash on him and will commit your authority to his hand.

And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah and I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open and none shall shut and he shall shut and none shall open and I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place and he will become a throne of honor to his father's house. The authority committed to Eliakim over the house of David and the keys that he's given to open and shut are very similar to the keys of the kingdom that are committed to Peter.

Peter will pioneer the gospel to the Gentiles. He will be one who opens certain key doors. Doors that are of crucial redemptive historical importance.

And so the importance of Peter as a character should not be neglected. Other background in the Old Testament that I think is worth paying attention to is found in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is commissioned for his work and he's told, Behold I have put my words in your mouth.

See I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to break

down to destroy and to overthrow to build and to plant. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, Jeremiah what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, you have seen well for I am watching over my word to perform it.

The word of the Lord came to me a second time saying, what do you see? And I said, I see a boiling pot facing away from the north. Then the Lord said to me, out of the north disasters should be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land. For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north declares the Lord and they shall come and everyone shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem against all its walls all around and against all the cities of Judah.

And I declare my judgments against them for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worship the works of their own hands. But you dress yourself for work arise and say to them everything that I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them lest I dismay you before them. And I behold I make you this day a fortified city an iron pillar and bronze walls against the whole land against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but they shall not prevail against you for I am with you declares the Lord to deliver you.

In that declaration to Jeremiah he's given very similar things. Authority to build and to plant, to destroy and to overthrow. It's similar to the power to bind and to loose or to open and to shut.

Those paralleled pairs are things that we see in the case of Eliakim, in the case of Jeremiah and in the case of Peter. And in the case of Jeremiah there's more going on there. There's a battle with enemies set around the gates in their thrones besieging the city and then parallel to that Jeremiah himself being besieged by opposing forces by the forces of the land who are rejecting him, the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land.

This is much what we see with Peter. Peter leads the disciples and the disciples and Peter are surrounded by all these opponents, these leaders of the land. But like Jeremiah, Peter is made into a fortified city, an iron pillar, bronze walls.

He is like a rock as he is established as Peter and the church is built upon that sort of foundation as he is established by the spirit in strength. This is a prophetic calling that we're seeing here I think and we should look back to the example of Jeremiah to find a paradigm within which to understand what's taking place. Peter has had something revealed to him by God.

It's a prophetic sort of insight and now he's going to be given an authority that corresponds to that of a prophet and on the basis of that prophetic authority God will

bring his gospel out into the world. God is building an assembly or a church upon the rock. It's interesting we might think that God might build a temple but no it's not a temple, it's an assembly.

You don't usually build an assembly but bringing the building metaphor together with the assembly metaphor we're seeing something about the character of that assembly that the church is a temple but the church is a military-like assembly at the same time and those two things together help us to understand what Christ is going to achieve through his body. That this body that's going to be formed is primarily formed of people. It's not an reality so much as a human reality.

A reality that's formed of individual lives joined together in a single body. One question to reflect upon. What are the gates of hell being referred to here? What are the gates doing? Are these gates that are being stormed by a military opponent or are they gates performing some other purpose? Think about the examples of gates that we have in scripture.

Some of the ways that the gates are described. Some of the things that occur at the gates and maybe you'll have a clearer idea of what is being said here.