

Reflections in Solitude — Week 12
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“Look towards heaven and count the stars... so shall your descendance be.” This was the promise made to Sarah and Abraham, the hope with which they let go of the familiar in order to spend a lifetime on pilgrimage. By definition, the nomadic life is one of continual change and discovery. Like them, as pilgrim people we must not cling to landscapes that are transient. Rather than being weighed down with the material, we carry lightly our acquired wisdom and sacred memories as we move with the Spirit.

Despite their faithfulness, the promise was not forthcoming for Sarah and Abraham, at least not in the time or way they imagined. So, they took matters into their own hands, declaring Ishmael—Abraham’s son by Sarah’s maid Hagar—to be the first in God’s promised constellation. In their minds, Ishmael’s birth was seen not as an alternative plan, but *the plan* God must have intended all along.

But the annunciation scene (Genesis 18) leaves no doubt that nothing is too wonderful for God. The alignment of stars needed for Sarah and Abraham would be God’s doing, for by then they were beyond childbearing. Sarah had reached her menopause and Abraham was... well, old. In the Hebrew, Sarah uses the word “shrivelled” to describe the situation and acknowledges they are past pleasuring each other, so how was conception even possible? The mere thought caused Sarah to giggle behind the tent flap.

The earthy innuendoes within this story point to the gift and necessity of delight and joy within the spiritual life. The journey with God is not a dry and sombre one. As Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

We are earthed and grounded creatures. Therefore, the joy that signals the presence of God is full-bodied, sensate and all-inclusive. What may bring a blush to our faces—especially within a religious context—is a strong thread within the fabric of our faith, especially among the mystics ancient and contemporary.

For example, below is one of the many prayers by Gertrude of Helfta (13th c.) given to the novices in her care to pray:

*My lover, my lover, give me your blessing;
flow out and let me in.
From my heart, from my heart,
I long for you, and I beg you,
beloved of my heart,
that I may be your own. Ah!
That in your living love,
I may sprout out in a new spirituality
like the lilies that enjoy the water and the valley.*



As voices throughout the centuries attest, the alchemy needed for fruitful faith and life is not divine intervention alone. Like consenting lovers, we must be open and willing, reaching out and making space for that Love which is always coming into our world.

Abraham is an example of this as he extends hospitality to the three visitors, receiving them as holy guests. Like Gertrude’s prayer, Abraham’s welcome is complete and without hesitation. He does not hold back and offers more than an obligatory cup of water and rest in the shade.

It is this generosity of heart and being that enables the consummation of love that bears fruit in our world. Quite literally, Abraham’s old self will need to be enlivened by the hopeful message of the visitors so that he might play tender host to his wife Sarah. And metaphorically, but just as tangibly, Sarah and Abraham will need to welcome the Source of Joy into their midst, to allow themselves to be reinvigorated heart and soul. It is this fulsome hospitality that will bring forth Isaac, the child of their laughter, delight and joy.

The shrivelled barrenness into which this story brings hope and newness of life is a state of being any of us can know, regardless of our age. Relationships settle into familiar patterns, some of which inhibit growth and stifle spontaneity. Unprocessed disappointment, suffering and grief cause our souls to wither or retract in self-protection. Fear and indifference keep us confined to what has always been, closing us off from alternative ways of being and opportunities for deeper, truer expressions of love.

More specifically, this time has been like a roller coaster as we retreated into isolation, adapted, discovered (or rediscovered) gifts, and managed tensions and anxieties. Now, we look to experience many of the same peaks and dips as we move back out into the world which is both familiar and strange.

Add to the pandemic the bushfires, floods, economic uncertainty, and cries for justice in the streets and we may be able to identify with Sarah and Abraham in the barren wilderness. The very real troubles that need our attention and good effort can feel all-too-hard, and the idea that nothing is too wonderful for God seems ludicrous.

But as the story of Sarah and Abraham affirms, being hospitable is the key to unlocking joy and life, not just for ourselves as individuals but for the collective within communities large and small. And Joan Chittister rightly says, I think, "Hospitality is not simply a matter of opening the door; it is a matter of opening the heart."

Several UnitingCare Emergency Relief centres across the state are experiencing this firsthand. Besides the obvious hospitality shown day-to-day, we are forming partnerships across the divide of theological, cultural, socio-economic and other differences that usually keep us from relating well, if at all. One of the new relationships we forged in these weeks is with the newish independent church in Glenelg, City Light. We are quite different churches in many ways and, sadly, these differences have kept us at arm's length much of the time.

But COVID has unlocked the door between us and Viv is one of the volunteers from City Light whose employment ended because of the shutdown. In her dire situation, Viv chose to volunteer because in her words, "Jesus has filled me with love and asked me to share it."

One day this week, a young woman came to St. Andrews for support. Arriving from Nepal at the beginning of the year, A. is a nursing student who, along with her husband, is struggling without income because of the pandemic. Besides the food we could offer, we linked A. with Viv who is herself on a temporary Visa from Brazil and is experiencing the challenges of survival in this climate. It was beautiful to watch the two young women sharing in solidarity, speaking in stilted English about their hardships and resourcing one another practically and with heart-to-heart connection.

It occurred to me this little spark of joy would not have come about without genuine hospitality—to others, to possibility, to the Divine Other. In recollecting this event now, I see an open heartedness by many people at many different thresholds, an openness that welcomed the Spirit into our midst and enabled God's love to flow.

Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote, "How should one live? Live welcoming to all." How are you being invited to open your door *and heart* to the manifestations of Love that come to us daily? May we be encouraged by the fulsome hospitality of Sarah and Abraham that brought joy and life to their barrenness and may it be so for each of us.

