

## "About the Harassed, and Helpless"

*Texts: Genesis 18:1–15; 21:1–7, Psalm 116, Romans 5:1–8, Matthew 9:35–10:8*

I want to start with a moment to ponder in our lives something that our scripture brings to life, today.

I invite us to think about the last time someone showed up for us? Not because they were asked, not because it was earned, not because it was convenient - but just *showed up*? Maybe it was a phone call from a friend who somehow sensed something was wrong. Maybe it was a meal left on a porch. Maybe it was a doctor, a pastor, or a stranger in a waiting room who just sat there and didn't leave.

That feeling - that sense of being *seen* when invisibility had started to feel normal - that's what all four of our texts are circling around today.

And I'll tell you honestly: I've needed that. I've been in rooms where I thought no one was caring what was happening to me. And I've been wrong about that, in the best possible way.

- 1. Sarah and Abraham:** Let's go back. Way back. Because if Genesis 18 gets read in isolation, it's easy to miss the full weight of what's happening. Sarah and Abraham are old. Not "early retirement" old. *Old* old. They're in their nineties. And for decades - *decades*- they have been holding on to a promise God made back in Genesis 12: a great nation, a son, a future. That was a long time ago. Now the text describes Sarah plainly as past the age of childbearing. The dream has not just been deferred. It has, by any biological measure, died.

Here's the cultural context that makes this scene come alive. In the ancient Middle East, hospitality wasn't simply kindness. It was *covenant*. It was a sacred obligation woven into the fabric of desert survival and theological imagination. When a stranger appeared at a tent, the expected response wasn't a polite greeting at the door or even a kind glass of water. The text says Abraham *ran*- this old man, he *ran* - to meet these three strangers. The rule was you ran - you killed your best calf, you made bread, you set out curds and milk. You gave the best you had. Why? Because in that world, the stranger at your door might be a messenger from the divine. The desert was brutal. A stranger who showed up was either in desperate need or carrying something sacred — and often both.

So when three strangers appear at the oaks of Mamre, Abraham doesn't wonder what to do... he runs to them. Sarah doesn't have a nap ... she bakes. The practice of **radical hospitality** was not charity. It was rooted in the heartfelt conviction that *God is present in the guest*.

And sure enough: one of these strangers speaks the word of the Lord, saying, "*At this time next year, Sarah will have a son.*"

What does Sarah do? Up to her eyeballs in baking for her guests ... Sarah laughs. And I love her for it, because the laugh she lets out is not joy. It's the exhausted, bitter, *yeah right* laugh. The laugh of someone who has hoped too long and too hard. The laugh that says: *I've heard this before. I'm not buying it, stranger!*

Three chapters later, Genesis 21: *"The Lord visited Sarah as the Lord had said."* She bore a son. She named him Isaac, which means *laughter*, and she said, *"God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me."*

The bitter laugh became joy. The dried-up hope bloomed and blossomed. After *decades*.

**And God asks, gently, not harshly, *"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"***

- 2. The Psalm** Psalm 116 is the voice of someone who has been through the valley and come out the other side. *"I love the Lord, because the Lord has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy."* The psalmist says: I was in distress. I called. The Lord answered. *"The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is merciful."*

This psalm was sung at Passover. Jesus himself likely had it on his lips in the upper room, in the hours before his arrest. It is not a psalm of easy lives and smooth roads. It is the psalm of people who have learned - sometimes the very hard way - that God *does* show up. Not always on the expected schedule. Not always in the expected form. **But God shows up.**

*"I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living."* That's not arrogance. That's a survivor, someone who almost didn't make it, whispering, "I'm still here and I am not alone."

That whisper matters for everyone who recognizes that moment when they were desperate and feeling all alone ... all alone in the mess of things BECAUSE ***"I walk before the Lord in the land of the living."***

- 3. Romans:** Paul, in Romans 5, names something that the second half of life often teaches, sometimes against a person's will:

*"We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame."*

Now, that can sound like a tidy formula or even a spiritual cliché, but it isn't either. Paul is describing something forged in fire. The kind of hope that arrives after a person has hoped and waited and kept hoping when nothing visible was happening. After we've endured not because we chose a discipline but because there was no other option. After we've developed character not as an achievement but as a scar that healed well.

And then Paul writes something stunning: *"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."*

Love not trickled. *Poured*. Not rationed. *Poured*. The image is extravagant and luxuriously wasteful - the way Abraham ran to those strangers. The way Sarah's laughter finally overflowed. Poured Love.

And just before anyone concludes they've earned this love through their endurance, Paul pulls the rug out beautifully: *"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Not when things were sorted. Not after the right steps were taken. While things were still a mess. God showed up.

And God asks, gently, not harshly, ***"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"*** ***Because God shows up while we are still in the mess. AND Because I walk before the Lord into the chaos.***

*All of this says, over and over, you and I are on the move and it will be ... interesting.*

- 4. Now to Matthew:** Jesus is moving through the towns and villages, teaching, preaching, healing. And Matthew gives this gut-punch of a line: *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were **harassed and helpless**, like sheep without a shepherd."* **Harassed and helpless.** That phrase deserves a moment, because I think some of us in this room know that feeling well - maybe better than we want to admit.

There is a real beauty and dignity in our culture, built on individual achievement and personal resilience - real dignity in the capacity to stand on one's own feet. There is also a pressure, often unspoken, that goes something like: *handle it. Be strong. Figure it out. Don't be a burden.*

Many people who have lived for fifty, sixty, seventy years or more carry that instruction deep in our bones. We who have buried loved ones, navigated diagnoses, managed the slow erosion of institutions we believed in, who rebuilt lives after things fell apart, who raised children who had the nerve to grow up, and sometimes move away. These people, we ... have carried things that didn't come with a repair manual.

And in our culture - this beautifully free, deeply individualistic culture we live in, the unspoken rule is: handle it. Be strong. Figure it out. Don't be a burden

I'm not here to critique our culture. There is a real dignity in self-reliance. It produces capable, thoughtful, creative and independent people. There's real beauty in personal responsibility. The capacity to stand on your own feet, to chart your own path - that's not nothing. We should honor that. And it also produces a particular kind of loneliness; the loneliness of someone who has been competent so long that they've forgotten how to be accompanied. Or maybe never learned in the first place.

And Jesus doesn't look at the crowd and offer a workshop on self-improvement. Because the harassed and helpless don't need a lecture on self-reliance. They need a shepherd.

His response to those harassed and helpless people is not strategy. It is *compassion*.

And then he turns to his disciples: *"The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers."* And immediately, he sends them. The **disciples are** the solution. He gives them **authority** to heal every disease, every affliction and the reminder, *"You received without paying; so give without pay."* AND it's REALLY going to be HARD. ... *"I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves" but here's HOW to do all this, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."*

Jesus changed our story. Jesus gave us a brand new covenant. Jesus placed you and I into God's plan for creation. Through Jesus God's creation resounds through us.

## **Closing**

Nothing is too hard for the Lord... The Lord is right behind us when we walk ... As a matter of fact, God's love is poured on us. AND, it's important we KNOW this because we ARE the labourers, we are the solution. We are the salve. We are the band aid. Here is what I see woven through all four of these texts, and I want to say it plainly:

**The God of our Scripture shows up for the harassed and helpless. And the people of God are called to do the same no matter how uncomfortable it may feel. We can do this because God is with us.**

There are two conditions here worth considering and I offer them not as instructions but as invitations.

The first is the invitation to *receive*.

There is a particular challenge that shows up for people who have been capable for a long time. People who built things, ran organizations, raised children, held things together, made things work. At some point - after a diagnosis, or a loss, or just the accumulating weight of years - the structures that sustained independence begin to shift. And for someone formed by a culture that prizes self-reliance, that shift can feel like failure rather than transition.

But Sarah couldn't manufacture that baby. Abraham couldn't summon the strangers. The psalmist couldn't climb out of the pit alone. Paul didn't jump out his prison window. There is a kind of openness that is not weakness. It is wisdom - the wisdom of someone who has lived long enough to know that human beings are not, in the end, self-sufficient islands. And **that** turns out to be good news.

Here's the question that is worth sitting with a moment, "*Is there something being offered to you right now that hasn't been allowed in? A community? A conversation? A willingness to say, this is hard, and I need someone alongside me. Not as defeat, but as Sarah's laughter - the kind that comes out the other side; the kind of laughter that asks, "Is anything too hard for God?"*"

The second condition is the invitation to *go*.

Jesus said the harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few. And in a culture shaped by ones' personal achievement, perhaps the most countercultural act available is to simply show up for someone else - unprompted, even ... heaven forbid ... uninvited, because something in the gut said *that person is harassed and helpless and I know what that feels like*.

Some of you have been through enough now that you carry a kind of medicine that cannot be manufactured and nobody else has. You've survived grief and diagnosis and disappointment and you're still here. You're still walking before the Lord in the land of the living. That testimony is not just 'our history'. Know that it's a *tool*. It's the very authority that Jesus gave his disciples: go, heal, give what you have received. You have the authority to sit with someone in the dark and say honestly, "I've been somewhere like this. Here's what I know."

That might look like calling the friend who just got the scary diagnosis, without waiting to be asked. It might mean joining a grief group - not only to receive, but eventually to be the one in the room who has made it further down the road. It might mean noticing the neighbor who you haven't seen lately, and becoming, for her, the strangers at the tent who turn out to be bearers of something sacred.

*We received without paying. And in exchange, we are asked to give without payment.*

Sarah laughed - and it turned into joy.

The psalmist almost didn't make it - and is still telling the story, across millennia, at the table, with wine.

And Paul says: *while we were still a mess, God loved us.*

Jesus not only saw, but he FELT that harassed and helpless crowd - and sends God's people toward them.

The God of these stories is not waiting for anyone to get it all together first. God is already running. And that same God is asking us to run toward someone else in the hot dessert ... toward people who are harassed and helpless. **We** deliver God's message of the love that seems impossible, because we surely know that God's love is true and that God's love is real and that God's love is here on this earth, that God's love is gathered right here today, that God's love ... is us.

***Amen***