

Paradox

Genesis 18:1-10a

Colossians 1:15-28

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Genesis 18:1-10a

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little 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 hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. 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 your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Colossians 1:15-28

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

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There was an Off- Broadway musical a few years ago that by its title alone it summed up so many relationships, so many friendships, so many marriages: 'I Love You,

You're Perfect, Now Change.' This series of vignettes humorously explored love in all its different forms from the perils and pitfalls of meeting someone new to the first date to marriage, children, and onto the twilight years of life. It was impossible to see it and not say, "Wow, this is my life, this is so true!" As odd as it may appear that even perfection needs to be perfected, needs to be changed, that is human nature, our human paradox.

Paradoxes—those statements which are contrary to common belief or expectation, are seemingly absurd or self-contradictory, yet when investigated or explained prove to be well founded or true. There is actually great power in the concept of paradox because it opens up possibilities beyond black and white reasoning, beyond concrete facts and even logic to look at them with new and unexpected imagination, to look from an abstract point of view.

A paradox is a statement with a stop sign, we cannot just read the words and move on. We need to pause, to consider, to reflect on just what is being said.

The more you fail, the more likely you are to succeed.
The more something scares you, the more you should probably do it.
The more you learn, the more you realize how little you know.
The more choices you have, the less satisfied you are with each one.

English writer, philosopher, theologian and critic G.K. Chesterton has been referred to as the "Prince of Paradox." He described a paradox as "a truth standing on its head, waving its legs to get our attention."

The Bible often uses paradox to explore the full scope and nuance of truth. Jesus is both God and man, Scripture was given by both human inscription and divine inspiration, and there is one God who eternally exists in three Persons. We are confronted with paradoxes such as a virgin birth, justified sinners, happy mourners and rich poor men. The use of paradox in the Bible is awe inspiring at times as it reveals such a deep spiritual richness and beauty. When truth stands on its head and waves its legs to get our attention, it causes us to take some time to reflect on the meaning of certain passages and investigate the truth, which is often times complex.

This is why Chesterton believed that paradox is the beating heart of the gospel.

Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.
But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.
The greatest among you will be your servant.
When I am weak, then I am strong.
So the last will be first, and the first will be last.
Peace was made through the blood of the cross.

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God," as the cross was the darkest hour in history, yet it was the time of greatest light.

Each of these paradoxes is meant to contrast an earthly view with a heavenly view. There is a difference between our material place and our spiritual reality, although we experience both at the same time.

Abraham and Sarah enjoyed a life of material goodness—land, possessions, servants, livestock, silver and gold, and a spiritual life with faith in God and did not worship the pagan gods celebrated around them. But for all that they had, they did not have a child, a true blessing of God, an heir to pass on to all that they had. When they were in their 70's, already beyond

parenting years, God promised Abraham to be a great nation, yet it would become 25 years—one full generation later—that Isaac would be born. The unexpected arrival one day of three visitors who were received with tremendous hospitality revealed the incredibility of God's promise, that the decades old promise was now just months away.

By the paradox of a 91 year old woman giving birth we learn of the many promises of God, promises we could not have heard, grasped, or fully appreciated had Sarah been a typical age for becoming a mother. At the age of a great-great-grandmother, the news of Sarah's soon-to-be pregnancy makes us stop, pause and consider just what God is doing, what deep spiritual richness and beauty is being revealed in this earthly view and heavenly view.

In due season we see that God's timing is perfect, that nothing is impossible with God, that God always delivers on promises, and that patience is a faithful virtue.

While Abraham and Sarah had to wait for the revelation of God's promise to become a great nation, Paul's teaching and writings were ahead of the revelation of God's promise of a Savior as revealed in the Gospels which were written later.

Through paradox Paul was able to introduce Jesus, to lead people to the Way, to whole new concepts, visions and a worldview of the Body of Christ. He was able to bring attention and provoke new ideas---that there is strength through weakness, that he is an ambassador for Christ even though he is in prison chains, that no one is beyond God's saving grace, and "to live is Christ and to die is gain." Without the resources that would become the Gospels, Paul used the concept of paradox to explain and teach and preach a world that was being totally transformed, a world now in which the last would be first, a world that now bears no distinctions of Jews, or Greeks, no slave or free, no male or female, as all are beloved in the eyes of God, that Jesus' violent and humiliating death on the cross was the life giving redemption of humanity, and that our physical death is not the end of life but rather the beginning of our eternal life. What Paul preached without the Gospels as resources of information can still be challenging and complex for those of us who do have the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to tell us the stories and the words of Jesus Christ.

Early in his letter to the Colossians, Paul speaks of Jesus as "the image of the invisible God, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." What sounds perhaps poetic to us was a paradox to the Jews who first heard Paul speak these words. When Moses had asked to see God face-to-face, God responded, "you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." Now God was being made visible to them, and in doing so this life not only continued, it moved on to become eternal life. Jesus makes the invisible God visible and understandable. Paul captured their attention as they could imagine God made visible through Jesus Christ—not as a physical being, but as the revelation of God to us. Following Jesus they could come to understand how we are called to image God in our work for justice and lovingkindness, in our actions of compassion and hospitality, in our prayerful responses of request and gratitude, and in our striving for peace and goodwill.

Beloved children of God, Paul's final words in our Scripture lesson speak of teaching in wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. How do you hear this truth standing on its head and waving its legs to get our attention? Amen.