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Our Pulpit.

Abraham the Friend of God.
The Patriarch's Home-Life

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church Fredericton, April 1st.

"And the Lord appeared unto him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door, in the heat of the day."—Gen. XVIII. 1.

Tonight I am introduce to you to a sort of old-time At Home at Abraham's tent. The scene is a charming pastoral one, simple, unconventional, true to life. Abraham is a wealthy sheikh at the head of a large encampment, numbering perhaps 1000 or 1500 souls. He possesses immense herds of cattle, droves of camels and asses, and flocks of sheep and goats, that feed in the valleys or roam the mountain-sides. At this time he is residing near the ancient town of Hebron which is in the south of the country. A lovely place about two miles to the northwest of the city in the vale of Hebron is still pointed out as the site of the patriarch's tent. A hoary oak, or rather terebinth, 23 feet in circumference, called Abraham's oak, is growing there today, but, of course, old as it is, it is not old enough to have seen Abraham's day. Near the oak is a well of good water. It is a lovely rural scene, and there, or thereabouts, must have been the patriarch's home during the years he dwelt at Hebron.

And first, let me try to word-paint for you a picture of home-life as it may have been around Abraham's tent. At the head of the fertile vale of Hebron, where it is shut in by grand mountains, is an extensive oak-grove, known as the oak-grove of Mamre. Here is the patriarch's encampment. You see all through the grove brown camel hair-cloth tents picturesquely grouped together, like a little town with winding streets. Children are at play, climbing the trees, and playing hide-and-seek in and out among the tents. Women, unveiled, are busied with their household duties. Far down the valley you see herds of cattle and asses feeding, with men and boys watching them, and up the mountains you can see flocks of sheep and goats with swarthy shepherds leading them. In other valleys there are other herds and herdmen, and on the other sides of the mountains are other flocks of sheep and goats, for Abraham's wealth of herds and flocks is great. They are counted by thousands.

Another marked feature of the home scene around Abraham's tent is his altar. To omit a notice of it would be a serious defect. Up the mountain-side, and apart, it stands under the open heaven. There is nothing particularly striking about it. It is as plain as plain can be, built of earth and unbewn stones. Here on the quiet Sabbath morning, all the people, the women and children as well as the men, gather for worship, and the reverent sheikh himself conducts the simple service, offering up a lamb, and sometimes a bullock, and kneeling down and crying aloud to the Great Jehovah, God of Heaven and earth, he invokes a blessing upon himself, and his family and people.

In the foreground of the scene I am describing, under a wide-spreading and full-leaved oak, is the patriarch's tent, differing from the rest only in its size and prominence, and hard by, and connected with it perhaps, making an extension of it, is Sarah and Hagar's. Under the oak you may see the patriarch seated in deep thought, or walking abroad to know how it is with his flocks and herds. He is tall, dignified; his features swarthy and rugged; his eye gentle, and yet with fire in it; his long hair, once black, now white with age, for he is verging on a hundred; but he is full of activity and energy. He can run like a deer, when it is necessary. Sarah is fair, and though ninety, looks almost young. She is a princess indeed, one who is gentle and ladylike in her way, and yet she can fire up when there is an occasion, and tell her mind.

When Abraham would eat, a table is spread for him outside under the shade of his favorite oak, and Sarah waits on him. His fare is simple, curdled milk, with wheat or barley cakes baked in the hot ashes. Now and again the meal is varied with a kid from the goats or a calf from the herd, tender and good, and roasted whole before the fire. His drink as a rule is water from the well, but sometimes perhaps a jug of sour wine. Thus simply he fared, and at a

hundred he was still young, younger than most men to day at fifty.

Secondly, The Reception of Strangers at Abraham's Tent. One lovely summer day, the patriarch being seated as his custom was at his tent-door, he chanced to look up, and saw three strangers standing some distance away who were waiting to be noticed. As soon as he observed them, he basted to meet them, and give them a welcome. When he came to them he bowed himself before them with great respect, for he saw at a glance that they were no ordinary strangers, and he extended to them the hospitalities of his tent. One of them was greater than the rest, and to him the patriarch addressed himself thus: 'My lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant; let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your heart; after that ye shall pass on; for as much as ye are come to your servant.'

And they accepted his invitation, and came and sat down under the shade of the oak at his tent-door, while a domestic waited on them with water for their dust-covered feet. Abraham excused himself, while he went to tell Sarah to take three measures of meal and bake cakes, and he himself ran to the herd for a calf tender and good. A servant dressed it as quickly as possible, and cooked it. Abraham then took butter and milk, and roast veal, and the hot cakes Sarah had baked with her own hands, and he set them before his guests and he himself waited on them as they did eat.

The leader then enquired with regard to his wife, who, being called, came to the door of the tent behind where the three strangers were sitting eating. He then told Abraham that next spring his wife Sarah would have a son. Sarah heard what the stranger said as she stood within the door behind, and laughed at the absurdity of the message, for both herself and her husband were now far advanced in years; and, moreover, again and again for twenty years and more she had heard a similar message, and so far it had not come true. So she laughed, laughed within herself, laughed a little incredulous laugh. But the stranger was quick to notice it, although his back was turned towards Sarah, and he felt hurt, and asked Abraham why it was Sarah had laughed. This made Sarah afraid, and she denied that she had laughed. But it was no use denying it. And he said, 'Nay, for thou didst laugh.'

The three guests were divine messengers, and one of them was the Lord Himself. Little did the hospitable patriarch know when he invited strangers to his tent that he was welcoming angels yea the Lord of Glory himself. But so it came to pass. And what a blessing they brought to his home.

Now, it is true the customs of society have greatly changed since Abraham's day, and angels are not to be met with in the streets of modern cities. Hospitality however is as much a duty and privilege as ever, and we should not deprive ourselves of the benefits to be enjoyed from it. And even to-day as well as in Abraham's day we may sometimes unawares to ourselves entertain strangers, or it may be the Lord Himself in the person of some of His servants or people. He has pointed out in His own expressive way how we may do it: 'I was an hungered,' He says to the righteous, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink, I was a stranger, and ye took me in.' And then He winds up with this pointed application: 'Inasmuch as ye did it unto these least, ye did it unto me.' And the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, again, in commending kindness to strangers puts it thus: 'Forget not to shew love unto strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.'

Thirdly, Abraham's remarkable prayer for Sodom. After the hospitalities of Abraham's tent were enjoyed, and the message for Sarah was given, the angelic guests took their leave. But the patriarch being reluctant to part with such good company, accompanied them some distance on their way. But he had come to where he must turn back. The spot where the parting would seem to have taken place was one whence there was an extended view of the rich Jordan valley and the Plain with its wicked cities. Here the four stood and gazed with a strange interest upon the splendid scene—splendid to look upon at a distance indeed, but not so splendid when nearer seen. The cities of the plain had come to be so utterly abandoned to wickedness that they could no longer be tolerated in the sight of

Heaven. And now they part, the two angels proceeding towards Sodom with their message for Lot, while the Lord lingers behind to tell Abraham the story of Sodom's doom on the morrow. It must have been hard to believe that the rich plain, so prosperous and happy, its fields so green, its towns full of pleasure and trade, its population drunk with success and excess, the whole scene so radiant in the summer evening sunshine, should, ere another day close, rather indeed ere another day arose, be a lake of fire and brimstone, tempest-tossed with cyclones of flame. But Abraham's faith hesitated not to take in the story of doom as it came from the Lord's lips. And now he was concerned for the wretched inhabitants happy in their awful ase there. They were ready to be engulfed in a fiery deluge, and they knew it not. They were on the very edge of eternal destruction, and no prayer was going up to Heaven for them. And especially his brother, how could he let him die without an effort to save him from the coming doom! But what can he do? He saved Lot before, but how is he to save him from this more awful judgment? He will do what he can.

So he sets himself to pray. He had slowly realized that he was face to face with the Lord Himself. What privilege! What an opportunity! And Sodom is to be prayed for, and Lot saved. So he comes near, and looking the Lord in the face, as one friend looks another in the face, and tries to win him over to think as he thinks, and to do as he wants him to do; so the man of faith does with the Lord. He reasons, expostulates, pleads, weeps, and it he does not wholly succeed, he does really succeed, and he shews us what prayer can do when it has a plea, and when it puts on its great strength.

I cannot do better than tell the story of this giant prayer-struggle over Sodom's destruction in the words of Moses, the words we have here. The patriarch's simple earnestness, his boldness at the thorne of grace, his pathos and power, his persuasiveness and perseverance—how tellingly and graphically described in language so simply grand! You see yonder the Lord and the Patriarch standing on the hill-top, with the plain and its cities spread out before them. It is eventide, and over the plain begin to stretch the lengthening shadows of the mountains; and by faith the patriarch sees deeper darker shadows gathering, and he realizes that so much depends on his poor words. And so he prays and pleads thus:—

'And Abraham drew near, and said: wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou consume and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked, that so the righteous should be as the wicked; that be far from thee; shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'

'And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sake.'

'And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, who am but dust and ashes; peradventure there shall lack five of the fifty righteous; wilt thou destroy all the city for lack of five?'

'And He said, I will not destroy it, if I find there forty and five.'

'And he spake unto Him yet again, and said, Peradventure there shall be forty found there.'

'And He said, I will not do it for the forty's sake.'

'And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak, peradventure there shall thirty be found there.'

'And he said, I will not do it, if I find thirty there.'

'And he said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord; peradventure there shall be twenty found there.'

'And He said, I will not destroy it for the twenty's sake.'

'And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once; peradventure ten shall be found there.'

'And He said, I will not destroy it for the ten's sake.'

Thus Abraham prays for Sodom, and he prevails every time he prays. I suppose we have only an outline of the remarkable prayer, a weak report of it taken down from the lips of Abraham as he told it the next sabbath morning at his altar, and so many times afterwards. It must have been a long-continued struggle, a prayer-wrestle that was contested and won inch by inch. At last the prayer is ended, the struggle over. The Lord proceeds on His Divine way, and the patriarch, weary with his

effort, returns, in the gathering shadows of the night, to his tent.

Fourthly, The patriarch's view of the Burning Plain. What a night for Abraham was that before Sodom's overthrow, a sleepless night full of tossing and trouble! He thought and thought of the people, happy in their way of it, dancing and drinking, while over their heads hangs a doom that the ages can never forget, a destruction the crash of which is even yet heard as it reverberates down through all time. His fancy pictures sweet home-scenes, little children asleep, and dreaming youths and maidens, men of business planning new enterprises for the future, and all unconscious of the awful morrow that they are to awake to. And thus hour by hour the weary night wears away.

As soon as it is light Abraham is away over the hills to the place where the Lord and himself had been together the evening before. The sun is rising gloriously over the mountains far across the Jordan valley, and bathing all the land in the splendid radiance of his roseate beams. It is hard to realize in such a lovely morning that anything terrible is going on anywhere. But Abraham's faith expects it, and when he reaches the spot where the Lord and himself stood, he sees far down at the foot of the valley, where it widens out into the plain, perhaps twenty miles away or more, a black cloud of smoke rising up, heavy and sulphurous, and out of its horrid inky folds bursting continuously sheets of flame and hot thunderbolts, and he can hear far off the muffled mutterings of the raging elements, and all the plain is engulfed in an awful sepulchral gloom. It is appalling to look at it from a distance, but oh, how terrible to be in it! At last, sick at heart, he turns away from the scene of woe, the hell where are being burned up the wicked of that day. But his prayer has not been in vain, for Lot is safe. It was a narrow escape, a hard run for bare life, but the angels helped him, and the race was won. 'And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in the which Lot dwelt.'

Now, in closing, there are solemn life-lessons here for us. Look on this home-scene, sweet as Heaven's love can make it, and then look at that other scene, bitter as Heaven's wrath can make it, and as we look at both, let us realize that those old scenes are being reproduced in a very real way in these times of ours. The same Lord who came to Abraham's tent with a sweet promise, went to Sodom, to its homes, with a curse. And so it is to-day. Jesus and his ministering ones come to us, and to one they come with sweet promises, rich blessings, glorious hopes, but to another, alas! they come with the blackness of darkness, the wild weirdness of woe, the knell of doom.

You look with Abraham at yonder burning, and he sees, and you see, that it is rained down from Heaven. The wrath of God has kindled that devouring fire. The philosophers of to-day find bitumen in great quantities there, the land saturated with it, the houses built with it, the streets paved with it, and so, they tell us, there was an accident, a fire was kindled that grew into a conflagration. But the word of God shews us that back of it all is the purpose of God, the rage of Heaven. And the same word tells us of a greater burning than Sodom's burning, the woes of Hell, eternal burnings, and it tells us in mercy to flee from the wrath to come. Nearer to you, O sinner, than you know, nearer to your soul, is Hell. You cannot think it. You scoff at such a message. But the lips that speak to us of Hell never tell lies, nor trifle with our fears. O beware! If we reject Him and His word, and harden ourselves in an evil course, there will come, must come, a burning that will burn down to the lowest Hell.

But why will we die? Jesus wants us to live, and He invites us to come to his arms for grace and help. No condemnation there; no Hell there. Let us then no longer delay, but let us press to him. There in your seat cry to Him, and you will not cry in vain. Over your soul will break the sunshine of his favor, and you will know the blessedness of His salvation.

[The above sermon is one of a Series on the Life of Abraham. The series as delivered will be published in this paper.]

CHRIST is a tried foundation. He has been tried by God and by devils; by many who are now in glory, and by others who are on the way there, and He has never failed. All the stones founded on Him become living stones, and they are all cemented together by the blood of Jesus. —Guthrie.