

Blogging toward Sunday

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An [icon](#) painted by Andrei Rublev in the early 15th century depicts the three men who visit Abraham sitting at a table. Though it is a scene from Genesis, the icon also displays the Trinity.

Three men wear sky blue clothing, indicating that they are persons come from heaven. To the left, the Father's blue robe is nearly hidden by a shimmering cloak of gold. He grasps a staff of authority, and rising behind him are some of the many mansions in his house. The central figure also wears blue and brown, since, as the Son, he joins dirt and sky in one person. Two of his fingers point to the cup of his blood, and the terebinth behind him is the tree of the cross, the tree of life. On the right, the Spirit wears the green of grass and trees and living frogs, while his hand touches the table like the finger of God touching earth. Behind him is a mountain, the high place of all theophanies.

Rublev didn't dream up this identification of the three with God; Genesis hints at it. We are told that Yahweh appears to Abraham, but what Abraham sees when he "lifts his eyes" are three men. The tantalizing interplay of "Yahweh" and the men continues throughout the chapter.

Yahweh visits Abraham to eat with him (18:4-8; cf. Judg. 13:15-23) and even more remarkably, Yahweh accepts Abraham's hospitality, so that Abraham becomes one who entertains "angels" unawares (Heb. 13:2). In Leviticus, sacrifice is described as the "bread of Yahweh" (Lev. 21:17, 21). Sacrificial bread, flesh and wine are offered on the altar as Yahweh's meal. In sacrifice, God tastes and consumes our offerings, and transfigures them—and us—by, and into, his eternal fire.

Meanwhile elderly Sarah stands at the doorway, the place of entry and exit, symbol of birth, where she hears the news that she will finally bear a son. It's a hilarious

thought, and Sarah laughs. Hers appears to be the laughter of unbelief, and she has to be reminded that nothing is “too wonderful for Yahweh.” But Abraham too laughs at the news (17:17), and that laughter is fulfilled in the birth of Isaac, whose name means “laughter” (21:6). For decades, Abram, whose name means “exalted father,” is the object of mocking laughter, but this laughter is silenced by Abraham and Sarah’s laughter—the laughter of fulfilled promise.

Paul would describe the scene in the Rublev icon as a scene of “peace with God” (Rom. 5:1). “Peace” means not only absence of conflict, but harmony and access (5:2). In the sacrificial system this harmony is depicted in the “peace offering,” which alone among the sacrifices involves a meal (Lev. 3; 7:11-18). Peace with God depends on the sacrifice of Jesus, who died for the ungodly and sinners (Rom. 5:6, 8). Jesus, the “bread of God,” offers himself as a sacrifice, and then offers himself at a table where men sit to eat with God. When heavenly bread becomes our bread, we know that we are at peace with God.

Strangely, Jesus says he does not bring peace but a sacrificial sword to divide Israel. He sends the Twelve to carry on his work of heralding the kingdom, healing, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, exorcizing demons (10:7-8). Jesus knows they’re going among wild animals, and he tells them they will cause divisions in families.

Facing wolves, the Twelve are to act with the innocence of doves and the cunning of serpents (10:16; cf. Gen. 3:1). Jesus has Proverbs 30:28 in mind. Among the small but wise things that cause Solomon to marvel are lizards that “you may grasp with your hands” yet somehow find their way into “king’s houses.” When the Twelve act as harmless doves, God makes them lizards and serpents who can slip unnoticed into palaces to testify to governors and kings (Matt. 10:18-20). Persecutors try to stamp out the Twelve, but instead open up a new mission field.

As always, God has the last laugh.