

## **Welcoming God the Stranger**

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Genesis 18: 1-15

I received good news recently that my old church in Texas has finally been able to resume its ministry of hospitality, Room in the Inn, a ministry that all the participating churches had to stop when the pandemic began. In Room in the Inn, a church welcomes up to fifteen homeless men into its facility for dinner, fellowship, a peaceful night's sleep, and breakfast the next morning. They've resumed it just in time, it seems. Temperatures in Fort Worth have been in the 110-degree range some days. It is extremely dangerous to be on the street.

Except for the clientele, Room in the Inn is pretty similar to Moscow First Pres's own outreach Family Promise. Both of them are ministries of hospitality, meaning that they take the risk of welcoming at-risk strangers into their home facility and treating them like real human beings. Whether it is a family struggling with poverty or homeless men living on the street, while there are direct benefits to the guests, the hosts also discover they get something out of it too. Each participant may describe what they receive in different ways but what it comes down to is HOPE. Whether you are a guest or a host, you leave the event more hopeful, more aware of our common humanity, perhaps a bit more alert to the blessings that come from the most unlikely places. It's an infusion of hope much needed in these challenging times when it seems like everything is aligned to steal your joy.

And hospitality and hope are the themes of our two scriptures today.

I enjoy Eastern Orthodox icons. (I'm not changing the subject, you'll see where I'm headed!) You've probably seen them. The figures are idealized and elongated, with simple lines, often on a gold or gold-accented

background, with embossed gold halos. My personal favorite is an illustration based on our Hebrew Scripture reading today, the story of Abraham and Sarah playing host to three strangers. In the icon, the three strangers are sitting around a round table, facing toward the viewer. It's meant to illustrate not only the three strangers, but also the three persons of the Trinity—Creator, Son and Spirit; Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. All of them arranged around a round table and therefore co-equal to one another, like how in the King Arthur stories all the knights sat around The Round Table to symbolize their co-equality.

Of course, in our Old Testament lesson, Abraham and Sarah are not thinking these are the three persons of the Trinity. Neither for that matter was the Bible. Nobody would have thought of that idea when the Hebrew Bible was written. But it's quite clear that whoever these three strangers are, they are not exactly human. The three men whom they host are apparently angels, some sort of divine beings. They are emissaries of Yahweh, the God who has sent Abraham on a divine quest. Now here's something you may not realize: After these divine beings visit Abraham and Sarah, they go next to Sodom and Gomorrah. They are performing a test of hospitality, and what we have here are two cases studies, right in a row. In the first case study, Abraham and Sarah *welcome* these strangers, and because of that are *blessed*; but in the second case study, Sodom treats these strangers horribly, and because of that, the city is destroyed.

It's worthwhile to note that Abraham and Sarah treat the three strangers as *angels*, and they are blessed; while the people of Sodom treat the three strangers as *demons* and are destroyed. This is not simply a cautionary tale about how to treat angels. It's a cautionary tale about how we treat those who are strangers to us, different from us, whose past and path we do not know. At its crux is the notion that when we welcome strangers, we welcome God. As Hebrews 13:2 says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unaware."

Abraham and Sarah show classic Middle Eastern hospitality to the stranger, a tradition that is thousands of years old. They aren't hospitable to them because they think they are angels; they'd do the same for anyone. And these are strange strangers, no doubt; they seem to suddenly appear before Abraham's eyes; they ask odd questions. These strangers are so strange that Sarah is overcome by curiosity, and she has to find out what

they are saying; so she dares to creep out of her traditional place in the kitchen area and hide behind the tent flap to listen. And that's how she hears the news she finds so hard to believe, especially because she is in her nineties: she who has never borne her own child will give birth to a son! She is so shocked by this that she laughs; and so the child's name when born becomes the Hebrew word for laughter, *Yitzak*. Isaac. Laughter. Joy.

But here are the strangers at Abraham's and Sarah's tent, these alien strangers, with alien ideas, and here's the crazy, dangerous alien idea they are bringing: they are bringing **hope**. They're saying, embrace us, these strange people. Embrace us, with our strange ideas. And a blessing will come. Have faith, Sarah. Believe this crazy idea, that in the strange, in the new, in the unfamiliar, in the different, in the alien, a blessing might come. If you entertain people and ideas different from yourself, you will discover that you have entertained angels unawares. You have entertained God.

I often think of this in relation to the immigration debate. Disregarding for the moment the complicated tangle of politics, bureaucracy, and regulations that would be needed to get us out of the mess our leaders have gotten us into, what it finally comes down to is: Do we see immigrants as a source of hope or as a threat? Are immigrants angels or demons? At our best, as a nation, we've seen immigrants as a source of hope. Those huddled masses yearning to breathe free got to come to the United States and build new lives; but the nation benefitted, too, because immigrants brought with them hard work, ideas, cultural practices, and values that have made us all better together.

Since 9-11 though, quite understandably, we've been much more wary of immigrants—more fearful. And we've done a pretty good job of securing ourselves against foreign terrorists. But in the process, we've become so security-conscious, so vigilant for threat, that we've turned our fears inward. Since we've minimized the threat from the outside, now we fear one another.

What has happened to our hope? Our willingness to be open to the always surprising and unlikely and alien movement of God, which always brings a blessing? It often comes to us from surprising, uncomfortable people, in surprising, uncomfortable ways. Sarah was curious and so she hid behind the curtain and overheard hope. We on the other hand, are

afraid and so we hide behind the curtain with our guns drawn. We shouldn't be surprised if we don't discover much hope that way.

Sarah's **redemptive curiosity** is our way forward. Instead of being afraid of the strangers, she was curious about them. When volunteers are trained as hosts for Room in the Inn, one of the most common questions we get is, "What do we talk to these homeless men about?" People are afraid they'll have nothing in common. And trainers and long-time volunteers always respond, "Just be *curious*. Be interested in them. Ask questions: about sports, about family, about life on the street, even about how they ended up homeless. You would be surprised how willing many of these men are to tell you about themselves if they sense you're really interested in them as people. Just be curious."

And it works.

But these days we're even scared of curiosity. We've enshrined certainty and view curiosity as a doorway to dangerous ideas. We ban books because we're afraid someone might get curious and read them. We create gated enclaves where "our kind" don't have to mix with "their kind," so that we don't have to confront alien ideas or lifestyles or ways of thinking. We visit social media sites and listen to radio stations and news outlets and watch TV that only play the music we like to listen to, the shows we like to watch, and report the news the way we already expect to hear it.

But Sarah's redemptive curiosity is the first step in opening the door to new people, new ideas, new people, new blessings—and the new and surprising ways that God is always at work.

One of the insights to be gained from looking at that wonderful icon of the three strangers around the table, who may also be the three persons of the Godhead, is this. As the strangers, they are guests, and Abraham and Sarah are their hosts. But as the three persons of God, they are actually the *hosts* and Abraham and Sarah are the guests. **God is at once host and guest.** This is what we believe as Christians. In Isaiah, God is the host of the great heavenly banquet:

Hear, everyone who thirsts;  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,

come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.

Jesus tells parables about wedding parties to which we are all invited, where the last shall be first and the first shall be last, and in them either he or God are the host. But in Jesus' parables, he is also the guest. He is the stranger in our midst, the homeless person or the poor family or the undocumented immigrant or the recent parolee or the person who has made the mistake of having an idea different from yours. "Whatever you have done for the least of these," says Jesus in Matthew 25, "you have done for me." This strange interplay of host and guest is at the root of why both the hosts and the guests of programs like Family Promise come away hopeful. Like God, like Jesus, we are always both host and guest.

Have you ever thought about the fact that anyone who agrees to be your guest is making themselves deeply vulnerable? You've probably felt that way the first time going to a stranger's house, a strong awareness that you are surrendering a lot of autonomy and control to someone else. It's why we're often nervous when we accept an invitation.

And at the same time, the hosts are making themselves vulnerable. They are opening their home and themselves for your scrutiny. Both host and guest are opening themselves to the possibility of disappointment, disapproval, or rejection.

When we meet at that level of vulnerability, as equals sitting at a round table, as host and guest to one another, when we listen and treat each other with curiosity, respect and humility, **we are listening for the blessing**. We are acting on this crazy idea, that in the strange, in the new, in the unfamiliar, in the different, in the alien, a blessing might come. If you entertain people and ideas different from yourself, you will discover that you have entertained angels unawares. You have entertained God.

And I really believe a blessing will come from that, for everyone.

I invite you, in the next week or so, to deliberately reach out to someone who is different, who you aren't sure about, maybe someone with whom you actively disagree. Ask them to coffee. Be curious. Be open.

Listen. Oh, yes, talk, as well—don't be afraid to be yourself. But make the conversation an opportunity for understanding, not an opportunity to make a point. Enter into it with the crazy notion that God will produce a blessing from it. And then see what happens. You may be the host—but in that moment you are both guests of God.

And there is always a blessing at any table God sets.