

Seeing God in the Stranger

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God of abundant life,
Your grace is our daily bread.
Nourish us by your Word and
fill us with your Spirit
so that we may grow in faith and love;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

It had been fifteen years since God first promised Abraham and Sarah a son—and still they didn't have an heir, let alone a nation. Our passage records God's third visitation to Abraham about this very issue. This time the Lord and his two angels appear incognito as strangers. You can tell something important and surprising is about to happen. The urgent and extravagant hospitality are cues. "Remember *always* to welcome strangers," says the author of Hebrews, "for by doing this, some have entertained angels unawares." Hospitality to wayfarers is a sacred act, an expression worship unto God.

So let's hear God's word to us found in:



Scripture: Genesis 18:1-15 (NRSVue)

The Lord appeared to Abraham^[a] by the oaks^[b] of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² 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. ³ He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. ⁴ Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. ⁵ 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." ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures^[c] of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." ⁷ Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. ⁸ 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.

⁹ They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." ¹⁰ Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?"

¹³ The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." ¹⁵ But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "Yes, you did laugh."

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Seeing God in the Stranger”

In Jana Riess’s book *“Flunking Sainthood”* she spends a year seeking to be more saintly. Each month she focuses upon a spiritual discipline such as prayer, gratitude, fasting, or Scripture meditation. In the month of October she dives into the practice of hospitality.

She was on vacation with family and friends near the Badlands in South Dakota. Her mother’s favorite cousin was a monk in a Benedictine abbey not far away. She was to get in touch with him during the vacation, but Jana put off the call until a day before departure. Wall Drug Store and Mt. Rushmore were a lot more enticing than a monastery.

“Hello, Father David? This is your cousin Phyllis’ daughter.”

At first there was silence. Jana realized Father David may have been bracing himself for bad news. He and his cousin were both well along in years. An unexpected phone call from a distant family member didn’t bode well.

“My mom is just fine. I’m actually visiting here with friends and family. We’re only about an hour away, and we’d love to see you if you have some time.”

“Ah, wonderful! When do you think you’ll be coming?”

“Well, here’s the thing...it would have to be *today*. We’re flying home tomorrow morning. I’m sorry I didn’t give you more advanced notice.”

“Ah, wonderful!” he cried. “Will it be you and your husband?”

“Yes, the two of us...aaand our daughter, whom you’ve never met...plus another couple...” Sheepishly she added, “Five of us total.”

“Ah, wonderful!” he cried. “We don’t get nearly enough visitors here. Let me give you directions. Can you be here in time for lunch?”

By the time the five visitors arrived, you would have thought Father David woke up that morning hoping against hope that a tour group would drop by the monastery. He gave them a tour, introduced them to all the monks and brothers and sisters and parishioners (he was also a priest at a local parish). Father David fed them an amazing lunch and answered all their questions about monastic life.

Although well along in years, Father David had an active and full life. But his Benedictine background had prepared him for this moment: ***There is nothing as important as making guests feel as welcome as Christ himself.*** We learn this not only from Father David and the Benedictines, but from Father Abraham.

Abraham was in his tent, in the heat of the day, taking a power siesta. Suddenly three guests appeared out of nowhere. Abraham doesn’t stay inside the tent. Doesn’t pray they will pass him by. No, he does what he always does: he takes the initiative and greets them.

Abraham positioned himself right at the crossroads of the Oak of Mamre. He welcomed everyone: rich and poor, kings and rulers, crippled and vulnerable, friends, strangers, neighbors, any passerby. Showing respect, he bows before the strangers. Please, stay, wash your feet, I’ll give you a morsel of bread to snack on.

Abraham sprints to his tent. Sarah, make bread, LOTS of it, from the finest of flour. He hoofs it to his herdsman. Kill the fattened calf and put it in the smoker. Hurry—we can't keep our guests waiting. He brought out milk to the guests—thought to be a source of strength and healing powers. Have some curds, too. The fattened calf was a meal fit for princes.

As the three strangers reclined and ate, Abraham stood and waited on them. The Jewish Talmud says: "Such is the way of the righteous; they promise little, but perform much." One rabbi describes the scene this way:

"In the beginning of the story, the visitors are described as standing above Abraham, who bowed down to them in respect. They were higher because they were angels and Abraham a mere human being. But at the end of the story, Abraham is described as standing above them. But when Abraham showed hospitality, providing food, drink, and shelter, he stood even higher than the angels."

Hospitality makes us not only more human, but also more holy. Godly, too. Back then, they didn't have AirBnBs, hotels, or rest stops. But we're still called to the spiritual practice of hospitality. It's one thing to recognize the Divine Presence when God comes as God. But it's quite another to sense God's presence disguised in the stranger. This was Abraham's strength—he knew that serving God and serving strangers were one and the same.

This was important not only to Abraham, but to Jesus. Do you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats? What makes a sheep a sheep? Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked.

"I was a stranger and you invited me in."

"Whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did it unto me."

A whole host of words come from "hospitality":

Hospital

Hostel

Hospice

Hotel

And the root word for all of them is FOREIGNER. Be welcoming and caring of the stranger.

Hospitality protects us from disconnecting with others in need. Hospitality connects, humanizes. Hospitality is holy. The miracle of hospitality forges alliances. Averts wars. Forms friendships. Fosters compassion and companionship. Companion—someone you break bread with. Welcome the stranger, so the stranger is no longer strange. It appeals to the better angels of our nature.

As Christians, hospitality must inform our understanding of immigration and attitude to immigrants. As Christians with the faith of Abraham, we can't have a callous or ruthless response to immigrants. Our voices shouldn't be the first to clamor for deportation or the separation of children from their parents.

Regarding specific public policies, good people will have differing degrees of how far we can extend hospitality. But no immigration law, whether liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat, if it is rooted in our Judeo-Christian values, can come from a place of cruelty or seeing people purely in economic terms.

Abraham teaches us that one of the key ways to honor God is to honor those created in God's image. In ancient times, being stingy and inhospitable to anyone, especially strangers, was considered to be one of the gravest of sins. That was the real sin of Sodom.

So what's a good indicator of the importance of faith in our lives?

Our attitude and behavior towards the stranger and those different from us is one good indicator of how deep our faith really is. Hospitality also nurtures healthy laughter. It loosens us up. We're freed to be ourselves and honest with one another.

Both Abraham and Sarah laugh. Not just Sarah. Abraham in chapter 17 and Sarah in chapter 18—God's promises to them make them laugh. Do you know what the name *Isaac* means? Laughter. Get this, the full name for Isaac can also mean "God laughs."

What's the saying—how do we make God laugh?... Tell him your plans. There are different kinds of laughs. **Laughing at** is very different from **laughing with**. There's cynical laughter coming from disbelief or resentment. Then belly laughter, from a place of deep joy.

God transformed Abraham and Sarah's laughter by doing the seemingly impossible.

Is anything too wonderful for God?

Is anything too difficult for God?

Another way to phrase it is: ***Is God, God?***

How would you answer that question?

This is a question asked over and over in the Scriptures. God asks us:

Is anything too hard for God?

How we answer this question determines how we live our lives and how we view the world. If we say, "Yes, some things are too hard, too impossible for God," then we have to ask ourselves:

Do we really believe that God is God?

Do we believe God can do the impossible?

Faith doesn't believe in fate. We don't believe in a closed universe. God is not bound by what he created. We have hope. We're not locked into the same script of the "multiverse" that we can't break free from. God can change our histories. Abraham, Sarah, you, and I can laugh again. God takes away our clothes of sadness and girds us with gladness.

We read later in Genesis 21 that as the Lord promised, Sarah gave birth to Isaac less than a year later. "God is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness." (2 Peter 3:9)

Does this mean God can and will do whatever we ask? Is every desirable thing attainable with God? Definitely, no. This only pertains to God's promises and will.

Think of Jesus in the garden before his arrest. *Do you remember his prayer?*

“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want, but what you want.”

God couldn't go around or avoid the cross and the suffering to get to the resurrection. You can't have a resurrection without a crucifixion. But God still sent an angel to comfort Jesus in his distress.

So this is a mystery—Abraham and Sarah experienced the miracle of birth. But countless other loving couples haven't experienced what they longed for. In these situations of waiting or not receiving, we have to trust God. To stay with God in the darkness, in the barrenness. To experience divine comfort, even in our sorrow.

Yet even in the pain and the lack of the present, we can smile at the future. Why? Jesus is God's resounding YES to all of his promises.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *“Abraham and the Three Angels”* (1966) by Marc Chagall, wikiart.org

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