

The Thousand Faces of God

Genesis 18: 1-15

Hebrews 13: 1-8

Before they have even learned their ABC's, it seems, we begin to teach our children cautionary lessons about strangers:

Don't talk to strangers. Don't take candy from a stranger. Never let a stranger into your house—if a stranger comes to the door, call Mom or Dad. If a stranger stops his car while you are playing in the neighborhood, back away from the car, if he starts to get out, run to the nearest house. The image we consciously conjure is of shadowy figures in dark vans and hooded sweatshirts. Strangers prey on unwary children and put razor blades in Halloween apples. Stranger rhymes with danger.

These are necessary lessons, I suppose, thrust upon us by a world that is imperfect and often dangerous. Certainly they are lessons that I have shared with my children—not to teach them to be fearful, but to teach them to think twice and to try to make wise judgments about people and situations.

But I hope these are not lessons that they have learned too well— alongside messages of caution, I have always tried to teach the message of compassion—learn to look upon strangers with the eyes of faith, watchful for the image of God.

Still, it is not difficult to discern which lesson we have better learned in our lives and our society. The messages of caution are quite specific, while the messages of compassion and care are general. Overall, the clear message is that strangers are like alligators—best observed from a distance, and approached with all proper caution.

Perhaps then, it is important that we hear anew the challenge that is to be found in our scripture lessons for this morning.

In our first scripture lesson, we hear of a special and supernatural visit. Abraham is encamped by the oaks of Mamre, with his wife Sarah and all of his servants and livestock. As Abraham sits at the door of his tent, he looks up to spy three strangers who have drawn near.

Now instead of keeping our culture's aloof distance, he responds with the tradition of the Bedouin culture. Bedouins are desert wanderers, and within that culture is a strong tradition of hospitality. In our culture, we teach that life may depend upon avoiding the stranger. Bedouin culture teaches the opposite—in the desert, life may depend upon the kindness of strangers...or their life upon your kindness. The stranger may offer water when your waterskins are dry, or may have news of grasslands where cattle may graze. Therefore, the stranger should always be welcomed.

So we see that Abraham does not hesitate for a moment—instead, he RUNS to the three strangers, bows deeply, and offers them the fullness of his hospitality—water to wash their dusty feet, bread, and curds, and milk, and even a calf from his herd. As the strangers eat, our scripture says, Abraham stands by as their servant, at the ready to meet any request or need.

At this point the twist in the story comes—the strangers, in the guise of tired and dusty travelers, turn out to be the bearers of a message from God. An unexpected message, a miracle long past any

expectation—Abraham and Sarah will have a son. And as soon as the strangers have delivered their message, they set off on their way. Thus we see, Abraham begins by offering hospitality to strangers—but he ends by encountering in those strangers the presence and message of God.

Now we might take the story we have just heard as many things—an isolated occurrence; an ancient folk tale; a story from the distant past and from a different culture, utterly unlooked for in our day and time.

We might take it as any of these things—yet its challenge is echoed in our New Testament lesson for today: “Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body....and on it continues.

The urging of the writer is clear—we are to look for the presence of the divine in those we meet: even in the unlikeliest of strangers; in the prisoner; in the abused.

And if we pause to think about it, the message from our two scripture lessons is consistent throughout scripture: at the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus' disciples encounter a stranger on the road to Emmaus—they walk and talk with him, share their story, share their sorrows, and in the end they invite him to share a meal...and as he breaks the bread, they recognize the stranger's face as being the face of their risen Lord.

Or again, in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus shares with his disciples the parable of the sheep and the goats. In the parable the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous are punished based upon their treatment of the strangers they have met.

Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

The astonished reply of righteous and unrighteous alike is, "Lord when did we feed or water or welcome you, visit you or clothe you?"

As you did it unto the least of these, Jesus responds, you did it unto me. As you encountered others, you encountered me.

Genesis, Hebrews, Matthew, Luke—the message of scripture is consistent. God, it seems, can turn up anywhere, in any guise, any person. So the challenge for us is this—to live as if that were radically true.

I say radically true because scripture does not promise that we will encounter God in those who are appealing or attractive or agreeable to us—that would be easy and cost us nothing.

But who else might bear the face of God? Might the outsider at school—the one who is different and difficult; the punch-line to the jokes of the popular crowd? Sit with that him, risk knowing her and their unpopularity might rub off like social leprosy. Yet Jesus dines with lepers as if they carry the image of God.

Or what about the person whose political views differ from our own? Not the neighbor or family member with whom we have a polite

intellectual disagreement—but the one who brings out the righteous anger in us; for whom every issue is a soapbox, and every conversation a confrontation? Might that person have something to teach us if we are compassionate enough to lay aside the deepest difference and to explore shared humanity? Before we say no—what are we to do with the parable of the good Samaritan, where the bitterest of enemies becomes a friend in need?

The call of scripture to embrace the stranger is no easy platitude—but a life-changing, world changing attitude, a recognition that the God of the Bible has chosen to fill humanity with the breath of God and to mark us with the image of God.

What if we saw the image of God in these strangers and near strangers, in our neighbors, in our family members? How many relationships might be reconciled, how many hurts might be healed? What if we looked at the person in the mirror who can be a stranger to us at times...might we see the image of God there, and seeing it, might we try to act more worthy of it?

The inspirational writer Scott Peck tells a story—a parable for our day, it might be said. The story is of a community of monks who live in like-minded solitude in a monastery. They are outwardly religious folk, versed in all the formal disciplines of prayer and worship, but their focus is really beyond the tawdry realities of day-to-day life. They have set themselves apart in blissful spiritual seclusion to await the coming of the messiah.

Yet with all of their practices and piety, one day follows the next and the coming of the messiah seems a far, far distant hope. At last, in disillusionment and despair, the monks send one of their number to visit a wise hermit who lives deep in the nearby forest.

The monk goes and says, “O wise and honored father, we work and seek earnestly for the promised messiah but alas, he seems far distant, and it seems his coming will never come to pass.”

The wise hermit ponders for a long time in silence. Then he fixes his gaze upon the earnest monk and he replies, “The messiah whom you seek is among you.”

“What?!?” the monk cries out? Who is it? What does the messiah look like? How will we know when we meet him? Or how will we recognize when we have touched her hand?” But the hermit only turns away and will say no more.

The monk rushes back to tell his colleagues the news, but they have no more clue what to do than does their comrade. So in the not knowing, they simply begin to treat one another a little bit differently—after all, any one of them, each one of them might in fact BE the messiah.

Not only are they different in relating to one another, they begin to reach out to the surrounding community as well. Would the messiah not be pleased by that, expect that of them, and call them to do it?

The monks do all of these things, and still the messiah does not come forward and say, “Here I am!” But at last the truth begins to dawn: as they reach outward, as they look inward, as they touch and teach and

heal and hope, live and learn, give and forgive—indeed, richly and truly and fully—the messiah IS among them.

Might the hope of the kingdom be as simple and as hard as that: to stop seeing in the stranger a difference or a danger and to begin to see the face of God and the presence of the risen Christ? Living as if the messiah is among us will bring the presence of God into the heart of our homes and families. Living as if the messiah is among us will impact how we relate to neighbors, to strangers, and even to those who try our spirits.

Do we believe that? Are we prepared to live it? The messiah is among us—wearing a thousand faces, shining deep in the eyes of his children.

Amen.