

United Church in the Valley: February 10, 2019

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***Making Space for the Stranger Pt I:***  
**“...Past Our Assumptions of Danger.”**

Scripture Readings:

*Genesis 18:1-10:*

The LORD God appeared to Abraham at the oak trees of Mamre while Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the midst of the mid-day's heat.

At that moment, Abraham looked up, and suddenly saw three strangers standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from his tent entrance to greet them, and bowed deeply.

He said, “Sirs, if you would be so kind, don't just pass by your servant! Let a little water be brought so you may wash your feet and rest here beneath this tree. Let me offer you a little bread so that you will feel stronger, and after that, you may feel free to leave your servant and continue on your way.” The strangers responded, “Very well—we'll take you up on your offer.”

So Abraham hurried to his wife Sarah, who was inside their tent. “Quick!” he said to her, “Knead an abundance of our finest flour, and make some wonderful baked goods!”

While that was happening, Abraham and his servant ran to the cattle, and prepared the rest of the meal. Then Abraham took butter, milk, and a fine cut of veal, along with the bread that Sarah had completed, and served it to his guests. As they ate, Abraham stood near them, under the tree.

They said to him, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” Abraham replied, “Right there, in the tent.” Then, one of the guests said, “I will definitely return to you about this time next year. By then your wife Sarah will have a son!”

Sarah was listening at the tent door. She was very old—far beyond child-bearing years. Hearing this announcement, she laughed to herself. The LORD God said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything impossible for God to accomplish? I will definitely return to you about this time next year. By then, your wife Sarah will have a son.”

*Hebrews 13:2*

Dear Church, keep loving one another like a family. Practice hospitality, welcome the stranger, for by doing this, some have even been hosts to holy messengers in disguise.”

Sermon:

So far, in our series of *Making Space*,  
 we've explored what it means  
 to make space for the *Spiritual*.  
 And as we heard last week,  
 one way that we make space  
 for the Spiritual in our lives  
 is through the work of justice—  
 feeding the hungry,  
 clothing the cold,  
 caring for the lonely,  
 and welcoming the stranger.  
 “*I was a stranger,*” Jesus says,  
 “*and you welcomed me.*”

But what does it really mean,  
 to welcome the stranger?  
 What does that look like?  
 Why is it so important?  
 And what sort of things hold us back  
 from more fully embracing  
 the strangers in our midst?

Those are just some of the questions  
 that we will be exploring  
 over the next four weeks of this *Making Space* series—  
 “*Making Space...for the Stranger.*”

And today, we'll start  
 by talking about danger.  
 And then, the Greek word for hospitality.  
 And then the puzzling story of Abraham and his unknown visitors,  
 and two possible different explanations.  
 All of which will lead us to see how  
 God invites us to make space for the stranger,  
 and the ways that we can start responding with our lives.  
 So first, danger.

For let's be honest,  
 that's the word that often gets associated with stranger:  
*stranger danger!*  
 Be on your guard for stranger danger!  
 Weren't you *taught* that as a kid?  
 Didn't *you* grow up with this ingrained in your consciousness?  
 I did.

And in many ways, when I was a child,  
 that warning of stranger danger  
 was a very wise and even warranted awareness—  
 but I wonder:  
 how much of that cautiousness and fear,  
 that sense of danger when a stranger comes near,  
 how much of that fundamental worry follows us  
 when we get older?

It's one thing, to believe in stranger danger  
 as a child—  
 and yet, to paraphrase Nick Coates,  
 the mentality of “stranger danger” also exists  
 on a more pervasive and persuasive level  
 in our adulthood as well:  
 this assumption of danger  
 is evident in the prevalent idea  
 that those who don't look like us,  
 those who don't sound like us,  
 those who don't think like us,  
 should be treated with suspicion  
 and probably—however possible—avoided.

And whether intentionally or not,  
 whether *consciously* or not,  
 we *continue* to embody  
 this inherent sense of stranger danger today—  
 just look at our societal attitudes towards immigration,  
 our instincts of *Not In My Backyard*,  
 the *walls* that we so easily build  
 separating them and us,  
 the in's and the outs,  
 the ways that we insist  
 on looking after *our own* people first.

Assuming the stranger is a danger  
 is a natural,  
 arguably, even evolutionary, instinct,  
 and yet, we don't see this attitude,  
 this approach to someone “other,”  
 anywhere in our Holy Scriptures.

In fact, what we find  
 is a constant call to practice hospitality.

Now, when you and I hear the word hospitality,  
 what probably comes to mind  
 is being a gracious host,  
 having some friends or family over in our home—  
 hospitality, like hospital, makes us think of care,  
 like the way that we share the peace of Christ,  
 or how we welcome one another to worship,  
 or offer coffee and cookies after the service,  
 making *sure* that our fellow familiar members  
 of this family of God  
 feel nourished, cared for, and well-fed—  
 in *my* head, at least,  
 that’s the meaning of hospitality,  
 but instead,  
 the original Greek word for hospitality  
 insinuates something a little different.

The Greek word for hospitality  
 is *philoxenia*—p-h-i-l-o, x-e-n-i-a.  
 And *philoxenia*,  
 what *we* translate as “hospitality,”  
 literally means  
 “love of the stranger.”

In contrast to our collective *xenophobia*,  
 our “*fear* of the stranger,”  
 countless stories across our sacred Scriptures  
 emphasize the opposite,  
*philoxenia*: “love of the stranger,”  
 not just hospitality  
 for those we love and know,  
 but a welcoming, a caring is what we’re called to show  
 to especially the unknown people that we face—  
 it’s the way that we start  
 to make space for the stranger.  
 And one of the places  
 where this approach is most apparent  
 is in the story of Abraham  
 and his three unknown visitors.

Now, this is one of those passages from the Bible  
 that is a bit *ambiguous* in what precisely happens.  
 The language isn’t exactly clear,  
 and it can appear to have two  
 slightly different meanings.

One interpretation goes like this:

*“The LORD God visited Abraham at the oak trees of Mamre, while Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the midst of the mid-day’s heat.”*

On other words, God appears to Abraham under the oak trees, and then, as this understanding of the story goes, just when God is about to say something important to Abraham, three strangers show up at Abraham’s door.

*“At that moment, Abraham looked up, and suddenly saw three strangers standing near him.”*

And as some ancient rabbis explain, Abraham basically says, “Oh God, can you wait a second? Some strangers just arrived. I’ll be right back.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, I don’t know about you, but that seems counter-intuitive to me— We’re taught to always put God first— As Nick Coates says,

*“How dare he put the divine on hold! God should be our first priority. Everyone else should come second.”*

Clearly, Abraham had the wrong priorities. But here’s the thing:

when the ancient Jewish rabbis would comment on this story, when they’d add their own insights over the centuries, they actually argued the opposite— God didn’t respond, “What? You can’t put me on hold!” but rather, “Of course! Go and welcome them in. I’ll wait right here.”

Abraham, therefore, had his priorities *right*. For what we see throughout our faith tradition, isn’t a call to avoid, or to fear, to not come near the stranger, but to welcome them instead—to show hospitality. As a Jewish friend of a friend once said, “Our hospitality to the stranger goes even before our worship of God.”

So Abraham goes and serves the strangers— he doesn’t seem them as a danger, but as a sacred responsibility, a privilege and priority.

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<sup>1</sup> I first discovered this interpretation of the story through Nick Coates: <https://www.nickacoates.com/blog/stranger-danger>

Eventually, the meal is ready,  
 the guests enjoy,  
 and *“as they ate, Abraham stood near them,  
 under the tree.”*

And there, patiently waiting under the tree for his return,  
*the LORD God says to Abraham,*  
*“Why did Sarah laugh?*  
*Is anything impossible for God to accomplish?*  
*I will definitely return to you*  
*about this time next year.*  
*By then, your wife Sarah will have a son.”*

That’s one understanding of the story—  
 that hospitality—love of the stranger—  
 is even *more important* than worship and  
 personal relationship with God.

There’s a second understanding of the story, though,  
 with an even more profound meaning.

And in *this* interpretation,  
 God doesn’t arrive before the other strangers—  
 God arrives as *one* of the strangers.  
*“The LORD God appeared to Abraham*  
*at the oak trees of Mamre,*  
*while Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent*  
*in the midst of the mid-day’s heat”—*  
*and it happened in this way...*

*“Abraham looked up*  
*and suddenly saw three strangers standing near him.*  
*As soon as he saw them,*  
*he ran from his tent entrance to greet them,*  
*and bowed deeply.”*

He invites them to find rest,  
 he recruits his wife Sarah  
 to assemble some baked goods,  
 Abraham himself, along with his servant,  
 goes and prepares the rest of the meal,  
 butter, milk, and a fine cut of veal—  
 and serves it to his guests.  
 During the meal, one of the strangers says  
 “I will definitely return to you  
 about this time next year.  
 By then, your wife Sarah will have a son!”

Sarah laughs, and in that moment,  
 the divine identity of the stranger is revealed:  
 one of the guests was God the whole time!  
 And God responds,  
*“Why did Sarah laugh?  
 Is anything impossible for God to accomplish?”*  
 And then repeats  
 what God had already said in disguise:  
*“I will definitely return to you  
 about this time next year.  
 By then, your wife Sarah will have a son.”*

In the first understanding of the story,  
 God encourages Abraham to put the strangers first.  
 In the second,  
 God actually *was* a stranger.  
 And thousands of years later,  
 Jesus would proclaim the same:  
*“I was a stranger; and you welcomed me.”*

It’s plain to see,  
 that in neither version of the story,  
 does Abraham ever turn the stranger away—  
 either way, this story calls us  
 to make space for the stranger,  
 for that’s what God desires and does,  
 and that’s who God is and actually was,  
 at least to Abraham,  
 and even maybe also to us.

*“Dear Church,”*  
 was the letter that  
 we read from the New Testament this morning,  
*“keep loving one another like a family.  
 Practice hospitality,  
 welcome the stranger,  
 for by doing this,  
 some have even been hosts  
 to holy messengers in disguise.”*

People of God, every day,  
 we are faced with strangers  
 approaching us or standing near—  
 strangers entering our churches with questions,  
 strangers amidst our communities with needs,  
 strangers travelling to our countries in caravans,  
 coming to our borders from war-torn lands.

And *it's so easy*  
to assume they are a danger.  
But God invites us  
to make *space* for the stranger,  
to practice hospitality,  
*philoxenia*, show them love.

For the danger we are scared of  
might just be a blessing;  
and the stranger that we care for  
might just be divine.

So who are the strangers in our life?  
Who are the people that we avoid and fear?  
How can we show hospitality to them?

Thanks be to God.