

## Sermon for Proper 11

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Genesis 18:1-10a](#) / [Psalm 15](#) / [Colossians 1:15-28](#) / [Luke 10:38-42](#)

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

### The Gift of the Stranger

“The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre,” opens our reading from Genesis this morning. With each passing read for me, it smacks more and more not only of the primordial story that Genesis is meant to share with the countless generations that follow, but it gets into my bones as one of the foundational teachings of our Judeo-Christian heritage. And, of course, that foundational teaching, that primordial story is one of hospitality to strangers. This story is recalled repeatedly throughout scripture – the ancient Israelites are reminded repeatedly from Moses to the prophets to safeguard the dignity of the alien, the stranger; to show hospitality to the wayfarer and the unknown. Even into the first century, Christians were remembering this story as essential to understanding how God comes to us. The Letter to the Hebrews recalls this story from Genesis this way: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (13:2) Later, Christians commemorate this story in art – the three angels seated at the table of Abraham’s hospitality became among the most famous depictions of the Holy Trinity across the centuries.



It is easy to lament the loss of hospitality in our own time, especially to the stranger. Whether it’s the controversial laws in Arizona or the broader anti-immigrant sentiment that always seems to materialize during hard times; or the natural suspicion we all feel when someone different or unknown appears in a place familiar to us. How easily we find the stranger dangerous, threatening, upsetting. As human beings, we must be reminded repeatedly just as our spiritual ancestors were that hospitality to the stranger is not a luxury or a choice when convenient, but a necessity. A necessity in good times in bad. In lush lands or in deserts. In the plains or on mountainsides. Wherever we find ourselves, it is our hospitality to the stranger that defines us. For our hospitality to the stranger is the first spiritual step in moving outside of our own insularity, our own craven desire to be in charge, to be in control; our first step into greater life.

Abraham, if you remember, had entered a covenant with God that made him and Sarah the parents of a people, that promised them a family as numerous as the stars. And when Abraham or when the ancient nomads who told this story around campfires thought of the stars, they thought not of them in the way we think of the stars in our light-polluted skies of urban and suburban life. They thought of them in the pitch black of a desert night, where the Milky Way was bright, and the only light they could see by was star light. Talk about countless stars! Talk about a promise that was as awesome as any as we could imagine!

Yet the rub of the story is that Abraham and Sarah are childless, and Sarah is beyond her childbearing years. So the message of these strangers in today’s story is as startling as it is prophetic. Sarah overhears the prediction of course, and in the next few verses laughs at the incredible nature of this encounter’s promise, even though it will come to pass

with the birth of her first born son, Isaac – his name itself a play on laughter – in that strange and wonderful ironic mix of her own incredulity and God’s laughter at the covenant beginning its long unfolding towards fulfillment.

Without Abraham and Sarah’s willingness to host these strangers, the covenant might never have taken root. Their witness in these ancient words is that hospitality resides at the very core of our spiritual practice, the art of being faithful to a God who comes to us when and how we least expect – most of all, and most powerfully, in the complete other, the complete stranger.

Then, of course, we have our Gospel today, where Mary and Martha of Bethany welcome Jesus into their home. In Luke, this story also has the feel of a mythic encounter, much akin in some ways to our Genesis tale of Abraham and Sarah. Like the Genesis story, it, too conveys meaning about hospitality – as well as discipleship. Martha struggles like every good hostess might to make ready a meal for the esteemed guest and teacher in her home. In fact, her name in Aramaic suitably depicts her role in the story – mistress (of the household). Mary, on the other hand, sits at Jesus’ feet – a position any good disciple would take. That Mary is a woman makes her act of discipleship more than somewhat scandalous to Martha, and that aggravates her already deep anxiety in making preparations.

The author of Luke asks us: How do we welcome Jesus the stranger? Is it only in our offerings, in our anxious preparations and striving, in our “clettering”, as my grandmother used to call it, about the kitchen? Mary and Abraham both teach us this day that hospitality is much more than simply providing a table and food. It is in the engagement of heart and mind, the careful listening and abiding presence, the opening of ourselves to the changes the stranger brings into our midst. This is what Abraham did in the primordial desert, at the edge of nothingness. He welcomed this strange God into his life, pulled up stakes and left all that was familiar. And then he welcomed God again, as the divine stranger came by the Oaks of Mamre. And it was in this welcoming that he welcomed the promise that God brought. Mary sits at Jesus feet to accept the promise of the Gospel, a moment as transformative for her as the strangers’ message to Abraham and Sarah that they would bear a child.

If our lives as Christians are marked by any one thing, then it is the times we welcome the stranger into our midst, either as individuals and as a community. Think for a moment of the strangers you welcomed who became your friends, who became your spouse, who became your co-workers and companions along the way. Think for a moment of those strangers who came into your life as children -- whether through birth or adoption, it doesn’t matter -- how they re-shaped and re-defined your world forever. Where would you be had you not opened your hearts to them? Certainly not here, not now, not in the way you are this day! For when we open the doors of our hearts to the other, we welcome the ongoing unfolding of a promise that can be traced all the way back to Mary and Martha of Bethany, all the way back to Abraham and Sarah by the Oaks.

And for us as Christians, make no mistake, the ultimate stranger we welcome in is God, whether it is in Christ, as our Maker, or as the Spirit – and, often, like Abraham, we welcome all three at once. And, likewise, whenever we welcome the stranger in one another into our lives and hearts, we welcome God as well. And in doing so, we choose the better part of our existence; the greater gift; the promise that has been offered us from the beginning; the one that leads to greater life – one which will never be taken away from us.