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"Unexpected Visitations"

[Genesis 18:1-10a \(The Message\)](#)

It's been said that the Bible can be a conversation starter with God. Instead of trying to clear our hearts and minds of so-called "distractions" (as some of us may have been taught), we can approach texts devotionally - bringing our own real life struggles, questions, desires, and hopes with us.

I'm convinced that this kind of "dialogue" is one way that God meets and draws us towards shalom: the deep peace, justice and reconciliation for which we, the world, and all of creation are longing. Of course, we Anabaptists believe that these conversations are best held with other followers of Jesus, with whom we can together discern meaning for our own lives.

This week, I've reflected on Jonathan Sauder's sermon last Sunday about Amos' tough words to God's people about their part in specific injustices. What a powerful reminder of God's clear and enduring insistence on rooting out injustice - pointing us instead towards life-giving justice for all!

I've also thought a lot about Joseph Gascho's benediction last week:

God,

*We were preached at today about it:
do justice.*

*It's been hammered into us in these pews so many times before:
do justice.*

*We will be reminded about it time and time again in the months and
years ahead:*

do justice.

God, this week,

may we act on what we have heard.

Let us

do justice.

Amen.

That really resonated with me. After all, one reason why we regularly come together is because we need one another to remind us of God's call to act towards making the now-and-not-yet of God's way real in and through our own lives each week.

We will always need to hear that reminder because actually doing justice is so often hard. It means swimming upstream against strong prevailing currents that swirl around us. Especially when our eyes start opening to systemic injustices, we can feel overwhelmed and paralyzed.

What can be done? Where in the world to start? I admit that's some of what I bring this morning to the story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming strangers.

A favorite story

As to the story itself, it's actually one of my favorites. First of all, I love Mediterranean food! What's described here immediately brings to mind two things - home-cooked dishes at the home of Toulia Bargas (the Greek mother of my dear college friend) and a fabulous meal we had a few years ago at Zahav, an Israeli restaurant in Philadelphia.

As I read about Abraham and Sarah scurrying around to prepare food for unexpected visitors, the scene readily unfolds in my mind: delicious grilled meat plus feta or yogurt sauce served with pita - something for meat eaters, vegetarians and vegans alike. I can almost smell the meat roasting and the bread baking.

This is food I'd thoroughly enjoy eating - especially if I was part of a trio of hungry travelers longing for a nourishing meal. As Hebrew Bible theologian Lisa Davison reminds us:

Hospitality customs were a vital part of the culture of the ancient near east. The people followed these customs as formal, even sacred, codes of conduct. The environment of the desert and arid land in most of the Middle East is harsh. For a traveler, access to water and food was a matter of life and death....Without the hospitality of strangers, a traveler could die. When one invited a guest into their home, the host was required to provide that person with food, water, and safety.

(<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-3/commentary-on-genesis-181-10a-5>, accessed 7/12/22)

Another reason I like this story is because of the plot twist. The story begins with Abraham and Sarah feeding three travelers. But it is the strangers themselves who serve up startlingly good news that nourishes Abraham and Sarah's deepest hunger: the child God had promised would be coming soon!

Divine encounters

Here at CMCL, we appreciate the general revelation of God through the natural world's incredible beauty and diversity and can draw strength for faith and life by encountering the Creator that way. Here we also gather around the special revelation of God through Jesus Christ whose life and teachings inspire and challenge us.

Today's story reminds me that God can also meet us in unexpected and life-giving interactions with strangers. By seeing and welcoming God in open-hearted encounters with others, we sometimes find nourishment and the renewed energy we sorely need if we are to continue to be part of God's story of peace, justice, and reconciliation in the world.

So how do encounters like this happen? The story in Genesis 18 begins with: "The Lord appeared to Abraham...as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day." Was Abraham sitting there praying, day-dreaming, dozing? We don't know. What we do know is that God initiated this encounter - and Abraham was at least awake and attentive enough to notice.

Another thing that's really interesting here is the way the story's language shifts back and forth between the singular and plural. While the Lord appeared (v.1), Abraham looked up and saw three men (v. 2). Then Abraham

said, "My lord..." (v. 3), but then sets the food "...before them.." and stands "...by them..." (v. 8). At the end "...one said, "...Sarah shall have a son." (v.10)

Some theologians say this language points to the trinity - the holy three-in-one. That's why Andrei Rublev's icon on the bulletin cover is sometimes called The Icon of the Holy Trinity.

But Rublev's work is also known as The Hospitality of Abraham - and that's what captures my attention about the story. When God appears through strangers, Abraham and Sarah respond with open-hearted hospitality - and it's in the midst of that interaction that the startling message is delivered. The new life that is coming is certainly God's good intention for them personally - but is also part of God's work of peace, justice, and reconciliation for the world.

What could happen if we lived with a deep awareness that God sometimes appears in surprising and life-giving ways through our day-to-day interactions with other people? What might it be like to welcome those we encounter as if we really do see and expect to meet God in them?

What startling word of challenge or hope might we hear as we prepare and serve food to folks at the Saturday breakfasts? What new possibilities might be spoken as we work with others in our community to dismantle systemic racism? Might being open to God meeting us through others allow the Spirit to renew us for our own ongoing call to act towards peace, justice and reconciliation?

Beginning in 2015, I served as interim pastor for a tiny Mennonite church near a rundown Greyhound bus station in Reading, Pennsylvania - a city that had been named 2011's poorest city in the U.S.

The church building had a magnificent sanctuary filled with gorgeous stained glass windows. But the congregation itself had dwindled down from a thriving multi-ethnic congregation of almost 400 to a loyal band of ten members. My role was to support them as they discerned God's leading into the next season of their life together. Sell their beloved building and find a smaller space? Merge with another congregation? Or dissolve altogether and move on separately? Understandably, they struggled with grief, loss, and anxiety about the future.

One hot summer Sunday, we met for worship in a small circle downstairs in the fellowship hall. As the service started, a middle-aged woman carrying several plastic bags filled with her personal belongings wandered in; and we invited her to join us.

When it came time for the offering, a basket was passed around the circle. Wanting to spare our visitor from being put on the spot when she might not

have any cash to spare, the member seated beside her passed the basket back in the opposite direction rather than handing it to her.

“What?”, she said rather indignantly, “Don’t you think I have money?” With that, she reached into her pocket and then dropped a handful of coins in the basket.

I went on to give the sermon, and then started to shift to sharing time when the woman interrupted. “Wait - that’s it? What about that part where Jesus calmed the waves in the middle of the storm? And how about that time when he took the loaves and fishes and fed thousands of people?” Not sure how to respond (or how she would take it), I said that we were focused on another story that day but that those were good stories, too, and it was certainly clear that she knew her Bible.

The service ended and someone invited our guest to stay for the potluck. She agreed, but disappeared while the table was being set and the food spread out. After a while, she returned; and we shared the meal together.

And then afterwards, as people were visiting, the woman stepped away and then returned with a small plastic bag. She reached in and took out a red Lindor chocolate, placing it in front of the person beside her. Wordlessly, she continued around the table - graciously presenting each of us with one beautifully wrapped exquisitely delicious truffle.

Surprising gifts

It was a small but extravagant gift from an utterly unexpected source - a passing traveler who appeared to have little. This complete stranger appeared from nowhere, insisted on putting her money in the offering basket, reminded us that Jesus calmed storms and fed thousands, and then bestowed this last lavish gift before disappearing as quickly as she’d come.

It felt like a benediction - a divine blessing on this tiny congregation that was struggling to find a way to continue to be faithful Jesus followers.

This week, CMCL’s senior youth are embarking on a service learning week - joining God’s work of shalom in this community and around the world. With Pastor Amanda, they will be encountering new people at the Food Hub, Wittel Farm Growing Project, Meals on Wheels, MCC’s Material Resource Center, Shalom Project, and our local neighbors through a free yard sale! As they learn and serve, my prayer is that God meets them in many people and ways.

As we each seek to follow Jesus’ way this week, may we welcome the Spirit of God in those we encounter. May we trust that sometimes God shows up in unexpected ways, bringing challenge, courage, strength, renewed energy or simply the blessing of strangers - and calling us to continue on as part of God’s story of peace, justice and reconciliation in our lives and in our world.