

When God Shows Up

Genesis 18: 1-15 & Romans 12: 2, 9-15

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 14 September 2008

The text isn't clear if Yahweh was alone or had three men, possibly angels, with him, for it says both. Maybe in the heat of the sun his sight was blurred and it looked like three men appeared. The first eight verses of Genesis 18 move along at a fast clip. Abraham offers water to wash their feet and allows them to rest. He offers a little bread to provide rest for their ongoing journey, never presuming that he is the object of their visit. He does everything to make his guests feel welcome, unhurried, relaxed. These are all understated expressions of hospitality, but then Abraham throws the ovens in the kitchen on full heat. Behind the scenes he's sending everyone off to mix the flour (6.5 pounds worth of flour) and knead the bread and tells Sarah to put a cake in the oven. Abraham quickly runs off to the herd to get a calf – tender and good – and gives it to the servant to prepare it. Then they fetch something to drink. All this flurry of activity is going on, in the background, while Abraham provides an enormous feast for his guests and makes it look easy. It is a feast for Yahweh and friends.

We're drawn in this text to see Abraham's generosity and welcome. This is because in Abraham's world *hospitality was the primary act of a civilized people*. Abraham and Sarah's actions are in sharp contrast with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in the next chapter who were not hospitable to their guests, which was the sin of these cities, *inhospitality*. Not so with Abraham and Sarah.

After they ate the guests want to speak with Sarah, who was in the tent. Women probably did not eat with men and were kept separate. One man says to Abraham that when he returns next year Sarah will be pregnant and have a son. Sarah, overhearing the conversation from the tent, begins to laugh to herself about the whole affair. I'm sure she got a

pretty good laugh out of that prediction. But Yahweh wasn't laughing. Yahweh says to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for Yahweh? At the set time I will return to you in due season and Sarah shall have a son." Then Sarah comes out of the tent and denies it, "I didn't laugh," for by this time she was afraid. Then Yahweh said, "Oh yes, you did."

This is an extremely old story, definitive for the Hebrew people and all those blessed through the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah – both Muslims and Christians. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman makes the strong case that everything in this narrative revolves around this pivotal question – "*Is anything too hard for Yahweh?*" It might even be the fundamental question of the Bible. It is God's question directed right at us: *Is there anything too hard for Yahweh?* Be careful how you answer this question. To say, *Yes*, then God is not God; to say, *No*, then we need to be open to something different taking place.

A lot depends upon our receptivity, doesn't it? It depends upon our willingness to be open. A lot depends upon our willingness to welcome – well, *God*. Indeed, there is a link between being hospitable to the stranger and entertaining the presence of God. There is a connection between welcoming the stranger and welcoming God. There's a link between receiving guests and receiving God and receiving a blessing.

This text provides a remarkable window into the custom of hospitality in the desert cultures. But it's more than just social etiquette. It's about the way we make space for the *other*, for the stranger; for it tells us something about how open we are when God shows up in our lives.¹ *When God shows up, unannounced and unexpected, how will we respond, will we welcome what God has to say?* One way the Hebrews and early Christians prepared themselves to welcome the presence of God was to make sure they were really hospitable to everyone. This is because God just might

¹ Cf. the quotation from the worship bulletin: "The classic sign of God's mystery is to entertain, to make room for the other." Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*.

show up on your doorstep in the stranger – or the strange. Either way, what are you going to do?

In her recent book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*, notes that one of the ten signposts of churches experiencing renewal is its approach toward hospitality. It doesn't mean that such churches have "welcoming committees" or hospitality programs, "where friendliness seems little more than a phony act to get newcomers to join the church." We're not talking about a religious Welcome Wagon, that emerged in the 1960s, which, "for all its friendliness, was essentially a way to promote certain stores and products." Hospitality is not a code word for "promotion," with the church as the primary product, where it becomes "an instrument used for another end: to sign people up as pledging members."²

Bass is spot-on when she writes, "*True Christian hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church membership. Rather, it is a central practice of the Christian faith – something Christians are called to do for the sake of that thing itself.*"³ It has its roots in desert, nomadic cultures where each guest was honored, given respect, cared for, fed, sheltered, in order for one to continue on their journey. It was critical in a culture full of nomads, sojourners and seekers, traders in traveling caravans trying to make a living, and religious pilgrims – sounds a lot like us.

Hospitality was practiced by early Christians (you can hear it here in Romans 12) to such a degree that even the Romans were amazed and in awe. *Philoxenos*, love, do not fear the stranger, Paul urged. Not xenophobia (the fear of the stranger), but *philoxenos*, the love of the stranger, the foreigner. That's what Christians do. They welcomed the stranger because they knew themselves welcomed by God. They

² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (HarperOne, 2007), 77-87.

³ Bass, 81ff. Emphasis added.

welcomed the stranger because they believed the face of the other just might be the face of God. You never know who is going to show up at the flap of your tent.

When the Roman Empire finally collapsed amid social chaos and violence, it was Saint Benedict (c. 480-c.547) who formed monasteries in the 6th century to provide refuge, communities commissioned to “receive guests as Christ.” The abbey I visited in New Mexico on the sabbatical, Christ in the Desert Abbey, is a Benedictine community that receives every guest as Christ.

Hospitality is not a program or a technique. It’s a way of life that stands at the core of who we are, we who bear the name of Christ. It flows from our hearts. This is something we as a church have spent a lot of time talking about over the last couple of years. The capital campaign renovations are being done within the theological context of hospitality. But it’s an ongoing journey for us. There’s always room for growth in this area. We must continually ask: how can we deepen our expression of hospitality? This is a question for our elders, deacons, and trustees, as well as for all of us. We might think we are being hospitable, but is that how people think and feel when they meet us? *Do they see Christ in us? Do we see Christ in them? Do we see Christ in one another?*

This week I thought about all the people who come through the church and the Church House who are not part of this faith community. Do they see Christ in us? Do we welcome them as we would the Lord? Consider all the groups that meet here: Al-Anon, martial arts groups, Scottish Country dancers on Monday nights in the gym, the Scouts; the people who come to the counseling center in the church house. Think about all the children in our Child Care Center and their parents dropping up and pickup their children every day. Or think of all the contractors who are on site every day. Sure, we’re paying them, but who are they? What do they see in us? Do they see Christ in us? Do we see Christ in them? One contractor came up to me this week and asked me to pray for close

friends of theirs who have lost a parent, a child, and now their second child is seriously ill. What an unbearable burden to carry. I said I would pray and that *we* would pray.

Is all this risky? Of course. The Christian life is risky. It means we have to be vulnerable. It means bringing people into the space where we live, of entering into our thoughts and hearts. It means bringing people close and not keeping them at arms length. If we don't do this, how else is true community going to take place?

Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) once said, "When hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers can become guests...Then, in fact, the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial and evaporates in the recognition of unity."⁴ In a post-9-11 world, filled with hate-filled extremism, the widening clash between civilizations, political polarization, and vilification of others with differing outlooks, opinions, and experiences, the importance of Christian hospitality becomes all the more critical in the church. We are called to model a different way of being that can't be found in the world. The work we've been given to do becomes all the more essential.

Being hospitable is still the work of a civilized people. To do otherwise is to miss an opportunity to welcome God. To do otherwise is to miss an opportunity to receive a blessing.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Doubleday, 1975), cited in Bass, 86.