

Angels Unawares

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It happens in the Bible again and again. Someone hosts an angel without even realizing it.

In the book of Judges, a woman named Manoah. She is out in the fields when a man comes to speak with her and bring a message from God.

Manoah invites the man into her home, and she and her husband prepare a lavish feast for him. When the family brought out the young goat to serve for dinner, the man told them to offer it instead as a burnt offering to God, and when the fire was lit, the man himself disappeared into heaven with the flame and smoke and Manoah and her husband fell to the ground in awe.

They had entertained an angel, without realizing it.

They had entertained an angel, unawares.

In the book of Genesis, two men arrived at the gate of a man named Lot in the city of sodom. Lot invited the men into his home, washed their feet and invited them to spend the night. \

"They said, "No; we will spend the night in the town square." But he pressed them strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house. And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate."

Now that night the men of the city of sodom surrounded the house and demanded that these men be thrown back out into the town square. And because of the cities failure to be hospitable to these strangers, God's anger is stoked and comes forth in fire and brimstone.

The citizens of Sodom didn't realize it.

But they had entertained angels, unawares.

And, perhaps most famously, a man arrived at Abraham and Sarah's tent and they welcomed him in, washed his feet and invited him to rest in the shade. Sarah made cakes of choice flour. to feed him.

It was this man who told them that they would have a child in their old age.

They had not known.

But they had entrained an angel, unawares.

It happens in the Bible again and again. Someone hosts an angel without even realizing it.

All three of these stories would have been well known to the early Jewish followers of Jesus. They were iconic tales from Israel's scripture.

And so the author of the book of Hebrews uses these stories to make an important ethical point to Jesus followers.

Be sure to show kindness to strangers, because in doing that some people have entertained angels unawares.

There is this show on CBS called Undercover Boss. I can't really recommend it as good television, but the premise is that the CEO of a large company goes undercover as one of its employees and works alongside others hearing candid reflections about what it is like to work at their company, and often learning themselves what they need to do to make their workplace better for their employees.

Scripture here is telling us that sometimes God comes into the world undercover, in the guise of a stranger seeking respite or welcome.

Jesus said this another way.

“I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” His friends asked him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?”

His answer? “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The worship of God can sometimes feel like a rather abstract thing.

We make our prayers, and sing our hymns, perhaps eyes closed and heads bowed, or gazing up at the heavens or out over the beauty of creation.

We have metaphors and images that help us to imagine who God is to us. We learn the ancient stories that underlie our faith.

If you have ever wished that God were a little more real, a little more flesh and blood, something that you could really touch and see, then you are in luck.

God is.

Did you notice how each of the heroes of faith we remembered today showed reverence to God? It was with food, and drink, and shelter.

Their service of God took on the form of the most ordinary things of their life offered generously to strangers without reservation.

Beds, blankets, shade, cakes, and hearty meals.

As this mornings reading from Hebrews continues, scripture calls us to connection with the vulnerable and downtrodden. Calls to to imagine ourselves right alongside them.

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are tormented as if you yourselves were suffering.

This is, in fact, what God has done for us in Christ.

It is one of the most incredible things about Jesus, God's own self incarnate in a human life, is that God decided not merely to tend our broken arts with abstractions from on high, but even God came to suffer among the suffering, to share our common lot, and to offer love in the form of bread, and friendship, and welcome.

This is the example that God has set for us.

And this is the call to us in these words of scripture.

Do not neglect to let your love come to life in the tangible things of life.

Keep your eyes and hearts open friends. For those in our world who are seeking shelter from life's storms, or who appear at the gates and shores of our lives.

Because in those moments, we are not merely being asked to be a good person, or to do something kind.

We are being asked to honor God.

Our God, the Holy One of our hearts desire.

Who, time and time again, comes to us, in the guise of a stranger.

And you and I, have the extraordinary opportunity every day, to open our hearts and our homes to the holy, without even realizing it.

The chance to entertain angels, unawares.