

ANGELS UNAWARES

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Genesis 18:1-14, 23:1-7; Matthew 9:35-10:1; 10:3-15

Do you like your Holy Trinity on your bulletin cover today? It's a line drawing taken from an often-reproduced icon, very popular with all of us women who went to seminary in the 1980s, and ever since. Here's mine, in color—it's kind of small, so please pass it around,

You see that it's the Holy Trinity all right, but look at their hair and their clothes. These are three women, and they're all seated around a table, the way women would at a kaffeeklatsch...oh yes, and they're also meant to be the three angels that came to see Abraham long ago "by the Oaks of Mamre, as he sat by the door of his tent in the heat of the day."

Well, here's the thing. There aren't really very many references to the Trinity in the Bible, so this one comes up around now in the lectionary. And as often happens in Genesis, it's a bit mysterious: "the LORD appeared to Abraham...he looked up and saw three "males" (that's what the Hebrew says—not the word for "human being," but the word for the "male" of any species—because, in the not-quite-Biblical-but-popular-nonetheless way of thinking in the ancient world, angels were a kind of species, too—they were considered created beings with souls but not bodies.) And of course, in the patriarchal culture, angels were male. They'd have to be, to be reliable messengers.

But as the centuries unfolded, somehow we got the idea that angels were more, well, at least neither male nor female: "like the angels in heaven;" or (by the time we get to popular song lyrics), "Earth Angel," "Heaven Must Have Sent You from Above," and my favorite angelic dance tune, "Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel..." they had somehow become female, at least in the popular imagination. Maybe it was the long hair and the flowing robes.

So I guess the artist who painted the original of this icon was thinking angels are ladies too, because here they are, in the robes and hairdos of the late Roman Empire, all sitting around Abraham's table; and as an illustration of this wonderful story about hospitality and grace, these three personages are also—the Bible says so—what the Graeco-Roman theologians of the Hellenistic period would have called a *typos* of the LORD, the Holy Trinity. And they do have a message to deliver. A whopper, as it turns out.

What's an angel, after all? Well, you know that. A messenger, literally, from *angelon* in Greek. A bearer of news. Or...some terrifying celestial being guarding the Throne of God, with not one pair but several sets of wings and all (that's where the idea of wings comes from), if you believe the Prophet Isaiah, who was kind of a crackpot but not so much of a crackpot as Ezekiel, say—well, Isaiah did say some pretty far-out things, but still...he was right about an awful lot, even if he did offend a lot of people.

But let's avoid the Prophets for the moment. Too controversial. What else do we "know" about angels? In our post-Christian world, I mean. Well, there's Clarence in *It's A Wonderful Life*, and the whole body of literature down through the centuries that suggests that angels are what we become when we die—if we're "saved," that is—otherwise, we become demons, but let's not think about that too much.

So today we meet Abraham, kind of in the middle of things. A lot has happened to Abraham and Sarah already by Chapter 18. You remember: by now, Abraham has been living in Canaan for some time, but originally he emigrated, or at this point you'd have to say he'd *immigrated*, from the other end of the Fertile Crescent, from a city called Ur, not too far from modern Basrah, near the Persian Gulf. Over a thousand miles away, by the roads they had then.

Back in Chapter 12, right after the Tower of Babel in Chapter 11, we're still over there in the Cradle of Civilization, or one of them, anyway: the delta of the Persian Gulf in modern-day Iraq. You know what happens: God leans over and taps Abraham on the shoulder one day, so to speak. Without any warning at all, or

even any indication of any prior relationship in all Abraham's 75 years up to that point, God tells him to pull up stakes, pack up his whole family and as many tools and possessions and livestock as they can manage, and...Abraham does it! They all trek up the Tigris River, right up and around, through the city of Haran in southern Turkey, over to Syria, and down through Damascus into the Land of Canaan. It doesn't look like much on the map, but it really is around a thousand miles.

(Just for comparison, Kenny Rogers is almost as old as Abraham was when he left Ur, and Kenny is only going to walk about three hundred miles—well, we love you, Kenny, but let's face it, we do know that you are a little crazy! I can't wait to track his progress, and I hope all of us support his walk. But I don't think Arlene and Christian are going to walk with him, let alone bring along all their camels and sheep and tents and gold and jewels and everything.)

Now, of course there were people already settled in the Land of Canaan. The Bible doesn't give us any indication that God had clued in the Canaanites about this plan. At least Abraham's well off in the first place, not poor, and as far as we know, he also *looked* pretty much like the people whose country he was moving to. That must have helped.

But do try to picture this. Can you imagine the conversation? "Oh, this god I don't know promised me that if I came and settled on your land, my descendants would become a great nation." "Oh, *goody!* Come right in!" That's some message God gives Abraham to carry.

But that's exactly what the Bible does tell us: that at the age of 75, Abraham migrated with his whole family and all their herds and provisions, on foot, over a thousand miles, because God told him, "of you I will make a great nation."

I don't know if you could even call that hope—foolhardiness, more likely. Crackpot, even, putting his family in harm's way like that. Was he getting a little dementia? I wonder what his family thought, especially his wife, Sarah. And for what? Nothing but a promise of opportunity for his descendants long after he's dead, a promise made to him by a deity who, at least as far as we know, Abraham had never met before, so he had no way of knowing whether this promise could even be trusted.

Then we have Jesus. Sending all his disciples out on a mission trip, with no planning, no supervision, and they've barely even begun to get to know each other. A lot of people wondered if Jesus was crazy, too, starting with his own family. He's certainly putting these new followers at risk.

At least he gives them a *few* directions—but the directions don't all make sense, either. "Not even a change of clothes, and after a long day of healing every disease and casting out demons and everything, you want us to ask people who don't even know us to welcome us into their homes?"

"How exactly are we supposed to do *that?*" I can hear Thomas asking—can't you? "And besides, do you really think, Jesus, that I'm going to be able to cast out demons and heal the sick, like you do, just because you tell me I can?" Where's my training? Can't we do some role play or something, first? Practice on each other? Anything? What on earth am I going to *say?*

Modern Westerners have no clue of the depth and holiness of hospitality that Jesus and Abraham took for granted. We experience something approaching it on our own mission trips, though: who in this room has not felt humble in receiving the generous hospitality of people we think we are there to help? It seems like the less people have, the more generous they are. And the rudest thing you can do is decline that generosity.

Faced with such an outpouring of love even from people to whom we are strangers, we are at a loss for words, and almost forget that in many cultures—I think of those of India and the Middle East to this day—it is impolite even to thank people, because that means you are offering a form of remuneration when what they are offering is the gift of themselves and whatever they have that will give you, their honored guest, pleasure and comfort.

And that is true, as far as I know, in any culture, but especially in those where life is hard. "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." [Leviticus 19:34]

Ever hear of the Massacre of Glen Coe? One Scottish clan, whose lands included Glen Coe in the Highlands on the way to Skye, gave refuge to another. The two were usually enemies, but the cultural imperative of hospitality superseded anything else in that hardscrabble land. And then, the clan in Glen Coe betrayed their enemy to the English. The whole country was outraged—not that one Scottish clan had betrayed another, even if an enemy, to the English, but that they had violated the sacred bond and trust of hospitality.

Now, I love the Lectionary Committee, I really do, but they do have a way of dumbing down the Bible, making it palatable to the general public. Our Old Testament reading is in two parts. The first, in which the LORD appears to Abraham embodied in these three angels, contains a promise that Abraham and Sarah will have a son of their own. And the second, three chapters later, tells us that Sarah did have a son, and named him Isaac, which in Hebrew means “laughter”. So from this we’re supposed to conclude it’s all about the baby, right?

Well, no.

What comes right after? These three angels, or God Almighty, the LORD of Hosts, if you prefer, are on a mission trip, too. They go next to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And we know what happens there.

Well, *do* we?

What happens? Abraham, the perfect host—even though (did you notice?) he violates the Law to do so, serving meat and milk at the same meal, and to God Almighty, and nothing happens to him!—anyway, Abraham haggles with God not to destroy the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. At last Abraham gets God down to ten righteous people: so if there are even as few as ten, God will spare the city. But...well, here’s how the Bible tells it.

The angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot [nephew of Abraham] was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, “Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant’s house and spend the night, and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way.” They said, “No; we will spend the night in the square.” But he urged 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.

But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them.” Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, “I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, *for they have come under the shelter of my roof.*” [italics mine] But they replied, “Stand back!” And they said, “This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.”

Now, the idea that this is an anti-gay text has been pretty systematically discredited, even in conservative scholarly circles. And it isn’t even about threats of gang rape *per se*, although that’s pretty horrifying. The side-by-side contrast of this story with Abraham’s hospitality, especially since Abraham is involved in this story as well, makes it clear—as do all the other references to it in the Bible itself, including this one from Jesus—that the Sin of Sodom was its profound violation of the code of hospitality. So you see, just as the law against meat with milk was less important to God than the sacred trust of hospitality to the stranger, so even the safety (and marketable virginity) of Lot’s own daughters was less precious to him than *the sacred trust of hospitality to the stranger.*

And this is what Jesus means when he says, while telling his disciples to seek hospitality on their mission trip, “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”

“How shall we live?” asks Mechtild of Magdeburg, a thirteenth-century Christian writer. Her answer: “Welcoming to all.” Hospitality is an essential spiritual practice, precisely because it goes against all our post-modern attitudes of cynicism, criticism, and judgmentalism.

Hospitality begins with an open mind, generous and receptive of others. Hospitality sees each new person as a present from God, ready to be unwrapped and discovered. Hospitality means looking for the positive in other people, those we know and those we don’t yet. It means assuming the best about other people’s motives, proposals, or dreams for a better life—even when we disagree with them.

“Christian churches and monasteries have a long-standing tradition of welcoming in strangers as if they were Christ,” write Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. “These places have an open-door policy toward those in need. They are heeding the advice in Hebrews 13:2: ‘Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.’”

“In the Biblical accounts, Jesus is the most hospitable of people, mingling with rich and poor, religious and anti-religious, and especially people of low repute. He continually crosses boundaries in the name of love. And when it is time for him to be entertained, the two sisters Mary and Martha take distinctly different approaches. Like them, we are hospitable in various ways in a variety of settings.

“‘Hospitality,’ writes Benedictine sister Joan Chittister, ‘is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world. Hospitality is the way we turn a prejudiced world around, one heart at a time.’”

Start, they say, as Jesus did, with your own situation and those who are closest to hand. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’ Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’ Share, as Jesus did, who you are and what you have to offer. Then extend the practice to your neighbors...and the world.”

Those of us who have been snubbed or even abused because of our skin color, sexual orientation, age, or physical ability—because of being “other” in any way—know what a threat to survival inhospitality is. But we have also all known times when we have been so lonely or in need that we have had to reach out to a stranger. We feel our common humanity with Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.”

As Abraham and Sarah learned, hospitality can lead to a transformed life. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some (meaning Abraham and Sarah!) have entertained angels unawares.” Today Jesus calls us to a ministry of healing hospitality, a hospitality in every aspect of our individual and corporate life, a hospitality that leads to *shalom*, where everyone has enough, and everyone who has enough is satisfied with what they have. “You have been treated generously,” Jesus says, “so live generously, too.”

AMEN. May it be so.