
When God Comes As Guest

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7

God appeared to Abraham under the trees of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. We call this a *theophany*: When God shows up in a visible, tangible way. And Abraham doesn't miss it.

Shane Claiborne is an activist and co-founder of *The Simple Way*, a Christian community housed in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia—an area heavily impacted by poverty and homelessness. I can remember some years ago hearing of the time Shane was invited to preach at a church. The church was situated in a well-to-do neighborhood, a larger church, I don't remember the denomination. On that particular morning, Shane arrived at the church dressed in ragged, baggy clothes, posing as an unhoused person, sitting on the front entrance steps. He recounted how many parishioners walked right by him on their way into the sanctuary, most not saying anything at all to him, some going out of their way to avoid him altogether.

Shane talked about the shock and confusion he witnessed on the people's faces when it came time for the service to begin and he walked down the center aisle and into the pulpit. Though his sermon that day had already been preached by what transpired on those front steps prior to the service, he proceeded to unfold the question: "How can we worship a homeless man on Sunday [in Jesus] and ignore one on Monday?" We are still learning that there is an inseparability between worship and action. How can we ever miss that we honor God by honoring God's image, humankind?

As people of faith, we are challenged to remain open to the ways God chooses to show up in the world, and in what faces we can encounter that presence. The narrative of Genesis 18 and Abraham's three visitors serves as a foundational text for the Jewish people. It animates the core value of practicing hospitality—

the belief that when you encounter and make space for the social other, you are emulating God. So, there is this religious obligation to welcome, feed, and protect strangers—a *mitzvah*, a commandment—and Abraham is the model. 99 year old Abraham—who is extra-fragile nursing his recent circumcision—is perched at the edge of the tent, in the heat of the day, almost as if standing on lookout for visitors who might pass by. Hospitality is not just how we respond to needs when they show up but how we position ourselves for its possible arrival.

The first verse of this chapter is almost a heading and not part of the narrative itself. It lets us know that what we are about to read is all part of a prophetic revelation, a divine-human encounter. “The Lord appeared to Abraham...” All that’s about to take place is within that context of theophany. Because of this, the Talmud—the central text of Judaism—puts forth the idea that Abraham was in the middle of encountering the Divine Presence, the *Shechinah*, when the strangers immediately appear on his property. Abraham was in his prayer closet, was basking in the glory of his Lord, when an interruption comes. What has become so profound in this, as a wisdom text, is the lesson that even more important than dwelling in the Divine Presence is showing hospitality to your neighbor. Abraham essentially asks God for a rain check while he goes out to take care of these strangers.

It says, Abraham looks up and runs to them—an emphatic redirection of his attention. In the age-old debate over what is better for the Christian, Contemplation (being in your prayer closet) or Action, Abraham shows us that there is a balanced place to stand between the two, what Father Richard Rohr calls “a fulcrum of critical distance”. Rohr says, “God offers us quiet, contemplative eyes; God also calls us to prophetic and critical involvement in the pain and sufferings of our world—both at the same time . . . those in monasteries...often don’t have an access point beyond religion itself from which to speak or to serve much of our world.”

When Jesus challenged his disciples to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” in their encounter with strangers, perhaps he was teaching them to find this “fulcrum of critical distance.” Be religious yet resourceful. Be spiritual but strategic. Come away from rush and hurry, but stay within earshot of how the world needs healing. Abraham had positioned himself between contemplation

and yet leaving the door of his tent wide open to notice the needs of those who might come along.

What we know of the ancient near east—the geographical location of the Old Testament—was that it was a hot, dry land, a very harsh and unwelcoming climate. Travelers getting from one place to the next would inevitably pass through the properties of others, many times out of necessity—thirsty and hungry on their journey, sometimes just to borrow the shade of a tree. Strangers would be completely dependent on the hospitality of others—often for their very survival. Also, think about how the idea of the stranger was itself shifting. The ancient near east was a very nomadic culture. People moved around a lot but they never traveled very far. They would have become somewhat familiar figures in the region where they lived. They might even be recognized and welcomed again and again by some of the same familiar hosts. Yet eventually, with the rise of the Roman Empire, travel began to increase as new roadways were built. This enabled people to take longer and longer journeys to lands much further away. And as time went on, the chance that you would encounter strangers would increase.

Showing these hospitality was baked into the covenant between God and God's people. Deuteronomy lays out the terms of the covenant: "You shall love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Duet. 10:19) Empathy. Solidarity.

What is more, when you encounter and make space for the social other, you aren't just emulating God, you are encountering God. I love Victor Hugo's quote: "To love another person is to see the face of God." Abraham's encounter with God in the three visitors sets off a heritage of understanding that God is revealed in the flesh and bone of human faces.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was moved to bold action when he visited the Abyssinian Baptism Church in Harlem in the 1930's and saw how they took care of their community. Before that, his faith was quite stuck in the clouds of German theological thought as a student at Union Seminary. He wrote, "Christ comes to us in the form of the beggar, the outcast, the person in need." Bonhoeffer would come to understand that a Christian encounters the living God not in abstract thoughts about God, but through concrete, sacrificial responsibility for the weak neighbor. And this conviction mobilized Bonhoeffer and his friends against their own German people and the evils of the Third Reich.

The Jewish Philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas believed that God cannot be fully understood abstractly or through dogma and theology—that is, mere talk *about* God. Instead, he believed the world contains “traces” of God, seen in the vulnerability of another human being’s face. For Levinas and Bonhoeffer, there was a moral responsibility: That looking at another person—especially the vulnerable and the outsider—you should hear the silent command: “You are responsible for me.” An imperative so strong, you cannot separate the health of your relationship with God from your relationship with your neighbor.

The Bible doesn’t mince words about this: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love the God he has not seen.” (1 John 4:20)

For some of us, there is a legitimate fear in making room for the unknown. It’s interesting to think of the word *Xenophobia*, which is an English word made from two Greek words: *xenos*, meaning “stranger” and *phobia*, meaning “fear.” *Xenophobia* then is “The fear of strangers.” In the Greek text of the New Testament, the word used for “hospitality” is *Philoxenia*. We recognize that root word, *xenos*; But it’s here paired with the Greek word *philo*, which means “love.” “The love of strangers.” Kind of like Philadelphia, which as you know, is: “The city of brotherly love.” Adelpheia meaning “brother.” It would have been something if the Quaker William Penn, who founded the colony of immigrants in Pennsylvania, called the city, *Philoxenia*, instead? “The city where strangers are loved”? I think that’s actually a perfect name and mission for a church! The Church of *Philoxenia* — “The church where strangers are loved!”

In our mission study, you voiced a desire to be a church of welcome and inclusion for all. This is certainly coming from a place to want to see our fellowship grow in numbers; but I also think there is a heartbeat here to want to be a sanctuary for all people. We are quite an assortment, already as we are. So, we’ve put a finger on that pulse. It will be interesting to see how we strategically position ourselves between contemplation and action, between worship and service, over the next year, and years to come. How will we strategize to find that “fulcrum of critical distance”—so that we enjoy this fellowship and yet leave our doors wide open enough to hear the needs of our community. Hospitality is the spiritual practice that saves tribes from tribalism, allowing us to expand the boundaries of neighborhood.

This week, in nationwide observances of PCUSA churches and the wider community, we are celebrating JUNETEENTH on Friday, June 19, and the following day, June 20, is WORLD REFUGEE DAY. We celebrate what can be transcended when a people become unwilling to keep the social other at arms length. And yet, what these observances also teach us is that we are still a people learning to see God in the face of the other. We are still learning that all humans are endowed with dignity as children of God—the *imago dei*—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, social positioning, and homeland. We are still a people learning that difference isn't a threat. We are still learning the expanded family Jesus commissioned us to care for.

God appeared to Abraham under the trees of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. A theophany—When God comes as guest. And while it interrupted Abraham's personal time of worship, he doesn't miss it. Will we? Amen.