

Angels Expected  
Genesis 18:1-16  
May 19, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

I've had visitors to my house recently, the kind of visitors that mean I need and want to do something in preparation. I cleaned, for one thing, and I went to the grocery store to be sure I had some of the things I knew each would enjoy. I made sure bathrooms were ready and towels fresh. I don't usually have orange juice, but I bought it for my Mother because she has one small glass a day. And decaf coffee! I changed the sheets after she left so that my friend Stephanie would have a clean bed and thought about vegetarian meals because I knew she would appreciate it. Now that's in contrast to when my daughter comes; often I warn her: "I haven't cleaned!" But she always says, "don't bother, whatever you've got is good with me." I am not suggesting that my other guests are less tolerant, but I just don't host them as often. For various reasons they are "special" to me. I think it's safe to say we go out of our way to make preparation when we expect some "special" to come to visit.

I love this passage for any number of reasons but the one I want to draw your attention to today is the gift of hospitality Abraham offers to these uninvited guests. Now I don't know about you, but normally I would assume that *uninvited* guests will just have to take me, and my house and refrigerator, just as I am. I mean, if you haven't told me you were coming, how could I be expected to prepare for your visit? But Sarah and Abraham live in a time and culture where welcoming someone unannounced was not considered a burden but rather opportunity to honor a valued, important tradition.

While there is not a direct correlation between practices of welcoming in the Hebrew Bible and our own Christian understanding of the gift and ministry of hospitality today, our contemporary theology of this important outreach *does* find its roots in ancient settings just like this one. Abraham would have recognized that these who approach his camp were travelers; they were not “neighbors” or even miscellaneous “strangers”. They were folks intent on a direction who were passing by their location. Remember, Sarah and Abraham were nomads, moving their family, flocks and tents with the seasons to find pasture and water. There were no Wawa’s on the corner, no hotels to stop in for the night, no Airbnb’s to book in advance. If you were traveling you walked or rode until you found a settlement or community; you waited outside the camp or in the center of town to be noticed and then when people invited you home, you went. And people *did* invite you. It was a matter of honor; it was a matter of survival.

They invited you because welcoming the traveler was an opportunity to engender community and to express generosity. It was the chance to reduce the risk of “stranger danger” by making potential enemies into friends. It gave the traveler a safe place to rest and the host the change to hear the latest news from wherever the folks had been. It added honor to the host and although there was inherent risk in welcoming others into your home, the practice of hospitality was valued because it recognized everyone as bearers of God’s image, each of us relational, dependent on one another and recipients of the Divine hosting of God.

As we consider our own understanding of welcoming the “travelers” who come our way in this place, think about what it feels like to be welcomed: to be anticipated, cared for, invited, received, enjoyed as part of the human family, as an expression of faithfulness to God

In your worship in action groups today, I invite you to think about how we can embody hospitality: which people, groups, organizations do we want to specifically welcome and how are we prepared to do that? What “travelers” stand just a way off, waiting for an invitation? Who among us feels a call to hospitality, to respond to those in need?

Abraham and Sarah welcomed the travelers depicted in this story, only to discover that these ones were not just “travelers” but “angels of the Lord.” Without knowing who they hosted, they brought water to wash and drink, prepared food to eat, had conversation that put these ones at ease. Only after the gifts of hospitality had been offered and received did the visitors reveal their true identity; they were not “travelers” but God! It reminds me of Jesus’ response in the Gospels when he tells us that when we do it, that is, feed, clothe, care for, defend, the “least of these,” we have done it for him. These angels brought a blessing that might have been missed if Sarah and Abraham had first offered hospitality and grace.

We are called to be a welcoming people. Our worship in action groups and our welcoming and affirming statement all set in motion God’s hospitality to any who might come our way. Let’s intentionally cultivate and prepare God’s welcome in this place so that we might not just expect travelers but angels in our midst!