

“Sometimes It Takes a Stranger”

I.

This is the third Father’s Day since my dad died. The timing of his death was hard. He made it to my wedding—barely—but it was the last trip he would ever take. By the time we moved to Des Moines—just a few weeks after the wedding—he was already too sick to travel. He died about two and a half weeks after I started working here. So he never had the chance to come to Plymouth and look everything over.

It’s a shame. I wish you could have had the chance to get to know him. He was a real character. You were never quite sure what was going to come out of his mouth, but it was generally safe to assume that any remarks he might make would be both funny and kind of inappropriate. You never knew who Dad was about to charm...or offend.

Come to think of it, maybe it’s just as well he never made it out here.

We were a lot alike—too much alike, my mom would say—but as the years go by I find myself thinking more and more about the ways that we were different. I like books; Dad liked people. He was the single most extroverted human being I have ever encountered. Part of that was upbringing: he moved around a lot as a kid, and so he had to make friends fast. He collected them everywhere he went. He never stood in a line without striking up a conversation; never took a taxi without coaxing the cabby’s life story out of him. No one was ever a stranger to my father—not for long, anyway.

And it’s not just Father’s Day that has me thinking about him. It’s this passage from Genesis, this story about the strangers that come into our lives. Sometimes the people we weren’t even expecting—the people we almost pass by—become the very people that change us forever. Dad was on to something, making sure he made friends with everyone he met. Somewhere along the way, he must have discovered what Sarah and Abraham discovered: sometimes God comes to us in the guise of a stranger.

II.

Last week, we heard the beginning of the story of Sarah and Abraham—heard how God came to them when they thought their best years lay behind them, and called them to get up and go someplace new. We heard how God made them an offer they couldn’t refuse: how God promised to provide them with children and land; how God promised to bless them and to make them a blessing. Last week, we heard how Sarah and Abraham said yes to the audacious promise of God.

Today, we pick up their story somewhat later. 25 years have passed since God first made that promise, but all Sarah and Abraham have got so far is 25 years older. These have not been easy years, and the promise God made so long ago must seem less likely with each passing day.

After all, if the promise of land sounded somewhat far-fetched when they were settled in Haran, how much harder must it be to believe after a quarter century of wandering wherever, of living no place in particular. If the prospect of offspring seemed remote for a couple in their mid-seventies, how much more remote must it seem now that Abraham has 100 years under his belt. After all this time, it must seem like the promise has passed them by.

As chapter 18 opens, it's just another day in paradise: Abraham dozing off outside his tent, seeking some shade in the heat of the day. He snores and stirs and shakes off sleep just in time to see three men standing near his tent. In every single respect, they appear absolutely ordinary –just three guys, passing by. But Abraham springs to life. He rushes out from his tent, bows to the ground, begs them to come on in and stay for a spell. Wash the dust of the road off your feet. Rehydrate. Eat something. Let me give you the chance to take a break. And the strangers say, “Sure.”¹

Then Abraham—who has apparently attained the age of 100 without any arthritis or aches or pains to speak of—starts running around and issuing orders like he's a finalist on *Top Chef*. He puts Sarah on cake baking duty; selects a calf for the veal piccata; grabs some curds and some milk and sets it all before the strangers –a feast fit for a queen, Thanksgiving dinner in the humid heat of June. Then he hovers nearby like an obsequious waiter, ready to freshen their glasses at a moment's notice.²

Over desert and coffee, the strangers turn their attention to Abraham. “*Where is your wife, Sarah?*” one of them asks. “*There, in the tent,*” he answers. He does not seem to realize that Sarah stands just behind the tent flap, eavesdropping on the whole conversation. “*I will surely return to you in due season,*” says one of the strangers, “*and your wife Sarah shall have a son.*”

And then Sarah bursts out laughing. Why shouldn't she? *She's 90 years old*. If she were alive today, she would have been collecting Social Security since Ronald Reagan's first term. She is, shall we say, a little past her prime. But her sense of humor still works just fine, and so she chuckles to herself at the thought of diapers and binkies and strollers and slings. At her age. That's hilarious.

Or is it? Sarah may have got a giggle, but the strangers will have the last laugh, because Sarah will indeed have a son. Beyond any human possibility, and long after Abraham and Sarah should have given up, God will finally come through. God will keep the promise. Good sport that she is, Sarah will name her son “Isaac,” from the Hebrew word for laughter –a tribute, perhaps, to the weird and wonderful ways of God.

III.

So...what just happened here? What is this all about? And who were those strange men anyway?³

Listen again to how the whole story is introduced: *The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.*” The LORD appeared to Abraham. It may have looked like three weary, starving, sweaty strangers darkening the doorstep, but make no mistake: this was an instance of divine visitation. One day God came to Sarah and Abraham in the guise of a stranger and shattered the world that they knew

Remember, we are only 18 chapters into the Bible. As the big story unfolds, God will do this again...and again...and again. God often shows up as a stranger.⁴ By the time the finishing touches are being put on the New Testament, Christians will routinely be urged to stay on the lookout. The Book of Hebrews puts it this way: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*⁵ The God of Sarah and Abraham, the God of Jesus Christ, has a habit of showing up when least expected, of entering our lives as someone we do not know.

You have to wonder why God would go and do such a thing. It seems kind of cruel. Don't we teach our children to steer clear of strangers? Don't we tell each other scary stories about poisoned Halloween candy handed out by the neighbor nobody knows? Don't we tune in eagerly to watch Stone Phillips and Chris Hansen catch internet predators on *Dateline*? Aren't strangers...strange?

Well, yes. But maybe that is the point. Sometimes it takes a stranger. Look at what happened to Sarah and Abraham. Little by little, inch by inch, year by year, they gradually gave up on the promise of God. And who can blame them? They had grown so old; the odds had grown so long. By any reasonable measure, the promise had long since passed its expiration date. And so they did what any one of us would do: they settled. They stopped expecting that anything would ever change; they started getting accustomed to life as it is.⁶

They may have stayed that way until the day they died...if it had not been for a stranger passing by.

IV.

There is something else you should know about my father: He was fiercely, proudly, staunchly conservative—in his politics, and in his Christian faith. But it was never an ignorant, knee-jerk fundamentalism with him. Quite the opposite, actually. He was my first theological teacher, and even after I went to seminary he still knew the Bible a lot better than I did. It's just that we came to understand it in profoundly different ways.

So it may seem strange, but this is how I had planned on honoring my father today: When church has ended, I was going to go down to the state capitol and stand with some of you and march in Des Moines' 30th annual pride parade. Now that some of the parade route is underwater, I guess we'll have to take a rain check—but whenever it's rescheduled, I'll be there. Dad would, I am certain, be horrified at the prospect of his son taking part in the “gay parade.” But I will do it, in large part, because I am his son. He is the one who taught me to welcome strangers, to suspect that someone new in my life may well be a messenger from God. And I've tried to practice the things my father taught me, even as the journey has taken me a long way from the faith of my father.

You see, some of the strangers who have come into my life have been gay, and lesbian, and bisexual, and transgender. As I listened to their stories—as I heard about the pain of life in the closet, the deep wound of rejection, the daily struggle for basic human dignity—something started to stir in me. The world I had known started to seem kind of small; the God I thought I had all figured out started messing with my head. I was led—no, I was seized by the Spirit and dragged kicking and screaming—into the wide open spaces of the loving grace of God. And the old, old story—the one I'd learned and loved my whole life long—started to sound surprising and new.

Sometimes it takes a stranger—to shake us, to wake us, to show up and shatter all our cozy little notions of who God is and what God is about; of what really is possible, and what truly is not. Sometimes it takes a stranger to show us something we have forgotten about ourselves; to remind us about something that we used to believe in; to tell us some secret we desperately need to know.⁷ Sometimes strangers say the darndest things—the very things we need to hear.

It's the lesson Sarah and Abraham learned so long ago, the thing my father taught me: sometimes it takes a stranger.

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Notes

¹ The importance of hospitality in this story seems all the more clear when it is read—as is no doubt intended—in juxtaposition to the Sodom and Gomorrah story in chapter 19. The sin of those cities was *lack* of hospitality. This was something that became clear during our Tuesday afternoon staff Bible study.

² In his treatment of the story, Calvin says that Abraham saw in the strangers “an opportunity sent from God.” Not that they were, as some interpretation has suggested, angelic or semi-divine beings; rather, Abraham’s sense of hospitality impelled him to do everything in his power to welcome a stranger. *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis, Volume I*. Translated by the Rev. John King. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), pp.468-477.

³ With apologies to the Lone Ranger.

⁴ See, for example, Judges 6:11-24 and 13:3-23, not to mention the resurrection appearances of Jesus in Luke 24:1-35 and John 20:11-18.

⁵ Hebrews 13.2, Revised Standard Version.

⁶ Admittedly, this is a bit of interpretation—the story does not come right out and say that Sarah and Abraham have given up, but I am in good company in supposing that they have. See Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 157-162.

⁷ I don’t really have proper attribution, but I owe this line about strangers and secrets to Richard Fenn, whose class on Secularization at Princeton Theological Seminary in the fall of 2000 is with me still.