

Genesis 32:22-31  
Matthew 25:31-46  
Text: Hebrews 13:1-

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania  
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## ANGELS AND OTHER STRANGERS

A Kansan who owned a general store made it a habit to offer a verse of Scripture whenever anyone purchased something from him. The locals who sat around his rural store enjoyed the exchanges because some of the purchases challenged the imagination and the store owner's honesty.

One day a Texan stopped in, wanting to buy a blanket for his horse. The locals knew that the store stocked two types of blankets. One sold for \$60, and the expensive one cost \$89.95. The owner showed him the cheaper one first.

"No, that's not good enough. I need something warmer for my horse."

The storekeeper showed the more expensive type, for \$89.95.

The Texan looked irritated. "That's not good enough, either. Don't you understand! This is for my horse, and nothing's too good for my horse. Now show me your most expensive blanket!"

The store became very quiet as the storekeeper reached under the counter to the \$89.95 stock, pulled out a plaid one and spread it out on the counter with great finesse. "This is our finest," said the storekeeper, smoothing the blanket with a loving hand. "Colorfast, 100 percent pure wool, with a very tight weave, the only one I've got. It sells for \$250."

"Now you're talking," said the Texan, beaming. "I'll take it."

As the storekeeper opened the cash drawer and carefully counted in the money, the Texan headed for the door and the storekeeper said softly, "Matthew 25:35, altered version, "He was a stranger, and I took him in."

It has become something of a convention in our culture to shun the stranger. Strangers tend to generate more fear than acceptance. Harry Freebairn says it probably began when we were children and were instructed never to talk to them. We sense that strangers endanger us. We put up "Neighborhood Watch" signs reminding them that *they* are under surveillance. Maybe it began long before childhood. Fear of strangers seems to be a reaction driven deep within the psyche, maybe even primal. Perhaps it's what the Bible hints at as our sense of estrangement from heaven, the sense that we are only traveling through here.

We are right to be wary. But this anxiety over strangers wasn't always as intense as it now appears. Certainly it isn't elsewhere in the world, even now. When I was growing up in England in the fifties and sixties the conventions of travel, for instance, put us at ease with far more strangers. We stood at the bus line with them, or on the train platform. We sat among and walked among strangers because we did not own cars. We often ate with them because in cafeterias and lunch rooms there seemed to be less seating, more sharing of space than now. We talked less on the telephone, if we had one, more face to face. We shopped in smaller stores, socialized in village pubs, and stood shoulder to shoulder at soccer matches among the *hoi*

*polloi*. It always seemed a bit decadent to me to see that section of the elite on the far side of the soccer stadium at Deepdale Road, sitting in neatly sanitized rows under a canopy. We rubbed shoulders more.

It seems there were fewer strangers. I remember walking down the street with my Dad, and how he would never pass a lady in the village—neighbor or stranger—without tipping his hat, catching her eye and offering a very civil greeting for the time of day. Now, we ride solo in air-conditioned, isolated bubbles, occasionally talking back to the traffic update on 1060, or talk phones, typically to people we know. Strangers have become something of a liability. I regret that. I miss some aspects of rubbing shoulders. We are constrained by many reasonable cautions, but those cautions have also stripped us of those serendipitous associations that build a sense of community and shared humanity.

Our culture's tendency to shun the stranger stands in real tension with our faith which says that we are to welcome the stranger.

I fear we give ourselves less opportunity to meet with angels unawares by shunning strangers. The Bible knows all about angels—messengers who bear a good word and a good presence. The Bible knows that God works constantly through the unexpected encounter: the compassionate traveler on the road, the stranger at the inn, the one who appears in the midst of a crisis—as if by happenstance? The Bible does this, I'm sure for at least two reasons. First because God uses us, often unbeknown to ourselves—God gives us into circumstances minute by minute when we might lift the tempo of another's spirit. It seems on one level to be an almost incidental thing, but in the car yesterday afternoon, on the way back from the Farmer's Market, I switched on Public Radio. On a call-in show a woman in her fifties, clearly struggling with the decision, called in to ask advice about going back to school. She listed a whole array of demoralizing concerns, any number of which the expert fielding the calls might have agreed with. But instead, his first words were affirming and encouraging. He said, "I want to applaud you for wanting to upgrade your skills and for giving the job market the benefit of them." Now there was an angel in disguise. It's that easy, I reminded myself. Whenever a word of encouragement, affirmation, or truth is spoken, an angel—a messenger of God, is at work.

A second reason, I think, why God encounters us through strangers is that strangers are the perfect vehicles for mystery. And that's what God is: one known—yet more largely unknown; a mystery to be entered into over the long journey of a lifetime; one both personal yet distant, whose infinite depth is to be plumbed by degrees, never to an absolute knowledge, always to awareness of the vastness still to be explored.

In the Gospels it is amazing how often Jesus is presented as one unknown, a stranger among his own. He is born in obscurity and has to be sought out by shepherds and wise men who are guided to him by supernatural beings and signs. After Jesus' baptism the people of his own village are appalled to hear the claims about him because to them he was just the carpenter's kid, who grew up among them, eventually spending perhaps thirty years among them prior to his ministry. He remained essentially a stranger to them, and when he preached his inaugural sermon, they not only rejected him but tried to kill him. The religious authorities couldn't come to terms with who he was because he didn't have the usual credentials—no rabbinical training, no seminary degree. Outside the Gospels the Jewish and Roman historians say hardly a word about his life, ministry and death. Even after his resurrection his own followers don't recognize him on the road to Emmaus, or beside the lake in the early morning.

I never met anyone who talked with Jesus face to face, in the flesh. I've known and talked with many people who looked back on circumstances and saw God at work, after the fact.

But in the moment itself—God came unawares—an angel, perhaps as a stranger. And so should we be alert to those moments when we might act for God and give space to the stranger. This morning's parable invites us to be a discreet presence in the lives of those whom we may never be conscious of. Perhaps the most startling thing about the parable is the surprise that registered with the righteous. "When did I do that?" they ask. "I don't remember doing that!" It's the same with the unrighteous. The parable encourages us all to become strangers with the face of an angel, delivering even unconscious acts of grace and charity in a manner that becomes a way of life—so unconsciously, so naturally.

Yet it does much more than that. When Jesus speaks to those who offered comfort and grace to the struggling, the underserved, the incarcerated, the hungry, the outcast, he is clear that he inhabits every one of them in their affliction. He does not just feel for them, he is with them; yet more, he is them. It is his own affirmation that he lives in even the most incorrigible and evil minded. How else can he say to the equally bewildered givers of compassion and withholders of compassion: "just at you did it [or: did not do it] to the *least* of these, you did it [or did not do it] to me" (Matthew 25:40, 45). We are made in the image of God, and insofar as Jesus is one with God, he is one with every tormented soul.

One expects to find Jesus manifest in the good person. But to find him as a co-sufferer in the soul of the wretched, suffering, dissolute, lost, is a staggering affirmation of his solidarity with every living person.

Albert Schweitzer, was a magisterial soul who had three earned doctorates in music (he wrote two now classic works on J.S. Bach), medicine, and theology, and who exchanged his extraordinary fame in society for a life of medical service in Lambaréné in central Africa, where he largely remained for 52 years. Here was a man who, retreated from the world and the extraordinary fame that it lavished on him in Europe, trading it for a life of the most obscure and private service. Ironically, Schweitzer found even greater international fame in isolation, even though his desire was only to serve Christ.

Towards the end of this ground breaking 1906 book, *The Quest For The Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer wrote:

He comes to us as one unknown . . . as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Amen.