

Strangers

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Genesis 18:1-14 — 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. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on--since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son."

How many of you have seen the new Beauty and the Beast film? I saw it just recently myself. Whether or not you've seen it, you probably remember how the story begins. An old beggar woman knocks on the door of a prince's castle, and this prince is notoriously selfish and unkind. She asks him for shelter from the cold in exchange for a single rose. Repulsed by her appearance, the prince sneers at the gift, and turns her away—only to discover that this woman is an enchantress in disguise. As punishment for his lack of compassion, she transforms him into a beast—and that's how the story begins.

Earlier this week, I found myself comparing the enchantress from Beauty and the Beast with the three travelers who visit Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18. Now, when you heard me read the Genesis passage a few minutes ago, you might have assumed that when these three visitors came to Abraham, he immediately understood that they were messengers of God. When Abraham sees them, he calls to them, "My lord," he calls himself their "servant," and he and Sarah go to great lengths to host these visitors well. But actually, I think that's a misreading of the passage. There's no description here of an angelic appearance; these three men seem to look and act like any other travelers. Moreover, the Hebrew word used for "lord" can also just mean "sir," and referring to yourself as someone's servant can be just a way of showing someone respect. As I see it, Abraham and Sarah pull out all the stops for these three travelers not because they know that they are divine messengers, but for a different reason: in their culture, this is simply what you do.

In both ancient and modern cultures in the Middle East, hospitality is not just something you whip out for dinner parties, not just a virtue in which certain people are thought to specialize; hospitality is a way of life—it is *the* way of life. In Abraham and Sarah’s world, everyone knows how to be a good host, and everyone is ready to be a good host whenever duty calls.

So, in both *Beauty and the Beast* and Genesis 18, the story begins with unexpected visitors, with strangers. The people who are being visited—the prince in *Beauty and the Beast*, Abraham and Sarah in Genesis—can choose either to warmly welcome the strangers or to turn them away. Abraham and Sarah choose hospitality, the prince does not, and only after they make their choices do they learn that there is more to these visitors than meets the eye. It turns out that the enchantress and the three travelers alike have the ability either to bless or to curse, and it seems that the answer to the question “Which one will it be?” depends on whether the hosts choose hospitality or not. The prince refuses to have compassion on a poor old woman, and he is cursed, while Abraham and Sarah offer a meal to the three travelers, and they are blessed. During the meal, God reveals to this elderly couple that a miracle is on the way.

What would have happened if Abraham and Sarah had behaved like the prince? If Abraham had, say, pretended not to notice the three strangers and just walked away? Would Isaac, the child promised to Abraham and Sarah, still have been born? According to the book of Genesis, God had promised, long before, to build a people out of Abraham’s offspring and to use these people to bless the world in a unique way. Theologically, I myself wouldn’t like to think that Abraham and Sarah could undo God’s promise with a single act of inhospitality. Really, they’ve made plenty of mistakes up to this point in our story, and God still kept God’s promises to them. Even so, I think it’s important to remember that it was through their welcoming of strangers that Abraham and Sarah learned about the greatest blessing of their lives.

When we were young, all of us were taught to be wary of strangers—and of course, that is good and necessary. I’m not suggesting here an uncritical openness to all people, at all times, in all ways. But here’s my main question for us this morning, friends: Has the “stranger danger” mindset become so engrained in us that we are unknowingly walking away from God’s blessings?

Shortly after I moved to Jordan, I was in the capital city of Amman one evening, looking for a famous restaurant. I knew the name of the street that the restaurant was on, and I thought I knew where the street was, but after wandering up and down crowded sidewalks for nearly half an hour, I was at a loss. As I was crossing a road over to a less-crowded street, I saw on the other side a group of four or five older men, standing behind a glass door, opening that door, looking at me and motioning to me. Immediately, I turned away and headed in a different direction.

Now, somehow, four or five minutes later, I found myself in the exact same spot from which I had just anxiously departed. One of the men, dressed in a black business suit, was holding the glass door open and standing outside now—still looking right at me. I slowly started to walk towards him, and before I could get a word out, he said, with a smile and a sophisticated

Jordanian accent, “It seems that you have lost your way.” Now feeling embarrassed, I managed to smile back and then told him the name of the restaurant I was looking for. He gave me directions, I said “thank you” in Arabic, and then I began to turn around and leave, but he stopped me: “Do not hesitate to ask for help here in Amman,” he said to me. “The people here are happy to help you. And welcome to Jordan.”

The very next day was one of my free days, and I had noticed this beautiful black-and-white checkered mosque at the top of a nearby hill, maybe two miles away. I decide that I want to hike up to this mosque on my free day. Now, I could see the mosque from the hill on which I lived, but once I got down off the hill and started climbing up the hill where the mosque was, at the top, I couldn’t see it. I walk and walk, and an hour or so into my hike, I still haven’t caught a glimpse of the mosque, and I’m increasingly unsure of the direction I should be heading.

I find myself walking through a residential area. To my left are several large sandstone apartment buildings. A large man walks out of one of the doors, and he says, with a smile and in broken English, “Where you go?” I am caught off-guard, but not frightened. I say “black and white mosque” in Arabic, and he nods in recognition. “I drive you!” he says. I notice that a taxi car is parked right outside of his front door. After a second’s hesitation, I decide that I’m fine paying for a ride—although I’m fairly certain that the mosque is nearby. But this man doesn’t walk to his taxi. He walks across the street to a small gray car. Now, this is a very different situation here: turns out that I’m not paying for a legitimate means of public transportation, which I had already done dozens of times by this point; instead, I’m climbing into the personal vehicle of a stranger.

Another second’s hesitation, and then I follow him, get in the car, and buckle up. Turns out, we were still a several minutes’ drive away from the mosque. During the ride, I use a little Arabic to tell him what I’m doing in Jordan, and he uses a little English to tell me about his family and his work. I learn that his name is Sufian, and he owns a shoe shop down the hill. Once we get to the mosque, I thank him profusely and offer him money, but he refuses. “Welcome to Jordan” were the last words he said to me.

Now, you don’t live in Jordan. You live here, and I think it’s safe to assume that you are more at home here than I was in Jordan. You may never need to ask for directions or to get a ride. *What do I need from a stranger?*, you might ask. But that’s not the question, friends. The question is: How might God want to bless you through a stranger? And the answer is: You won’t know until you, like Abraham and Sarah, choose hospitality. Amen.