

“Creating a Safe Place”
Genesis 18:1-8, Luke 2:1-7

If there's one thing I hate, it's travelling a great distance and arriving at my destination to find that there is **no room** at any of the hotels. Has this ever happened to you? Doesn't it make you anxious? It sure sets my nerves on edge. I begin to panic – where will I sleep? Where will I take care of my personal needs? Am I going to have to keep driving all night? Will I have to sleep in the car? Maybe the police will think I'm a vagrant and arrest me! Okay, so I worry too much. But even so, when you've been on the road for a long time, and your tired and ready to stop and rest, it is pretty upsetting when even Motel 6 has turned off the light on you and you've literally got no place else to go. Imagine, then, how terrible it must have been for Mary and Joseph. They arrived in Bethlehem and there was no room for them in any inn. And they didn't have a fast car to get to another destination. They were travelling by foot – or maybe by mule – and driving to the next city just wasn't an option. They were relative strangers in town, and had no one to turn to for help. Worse yet, Mary was pregnant. Well, not just pregnant, she had gone into labor. Can you imagine how they would have felt? I suspect panic would be too mild a word to describe their feelings.

It is hard to be a stranger. When you are a stranger, people shy away from you. They view you with suspicion. They often hold back from talking to you, if for no other reason than they don't know what to say. Or maybe they think they should know you and are embarrassed to admit that they don't! When you are a stranger, it is hard to find a place to rest or take comfort, because no one wants to know you. So you either remain on the fringes of the community, or you just keep on moving.

We've all been strangers at one point or another. Whenever you move to a new place, change to a new school, join a new group, or visit a new church, you become a stranger – out of your comfort zone, away from all that is familiar, and quite likely confused by those things that are new and different. Today, our scriptures summon us to remember those times we have been strangers so that we may develop compassion for the strangers we meet. After all, Jesus came to earth as a stranger, and he still meets us in the faces of the strangers we encounter.

Our story of Abraham welcoming the group of strangers gives us some good guidance on what is involved in showing hospitality to those we don't know. One thing is abundantly clear: **Welcoming the stranger takes effort.**

If you want to show hospitality to someone you don't know, you've got to be able to **break your routine**. We never plan on the arrival of a stranger, and so our days are already filled with plans and activities. Strangers never arrive when it is convenient. To show them hospitality requires a break from our routine. Abraham was taking his afternoon siesta when the three men appeared. He could have closed his eyes, ignored them, and continued with his nap. But he didn't. Instead he changed his plans, got up, and welcomed them.

The strangers who appear to us will also appear when it isn't convenient. Even here in church, when someone new shows up, you probably won't be standing there with nothing to do, waiting to greet newcomers. You probably have plans – friends you want to talk to, or a class you want to go to. Maybe you want to give the pastor an earful about how silly the sermon was. Or maybe you are on your way to have lunch. Whatever it is, you surely have a plan, some routine you want to fulfill. And then the stranger appears. What do you do? You could just keep talking to your friend or walking to your class. You could slide by them, maybe saying hello, but still firmly set on-course for Bob Evans. Or maybe, like Abraham, you could set aside your plan, if only for a time, and welcome them – engaging them in conversation, and providing what they need in order to feel comfortable. You might even choose to adopt a new mindset when you come to church; planning your schedule a little more flexibly, so that you can be on the lookout for strangers. I heard of one couple who made it their mission to welcome newcomers to their church. They would look for people they didn't know, and make a point of introducing themselves and warmly welcoming them. More than that, they would invite the strangers to join them for some activity – sometimes inviting them to come to Sunday school with them, other times inviting them out to lunch. But whatever they did, they intentionally left their routine flexible so that they would be ready to extend Christ's hospitality to newcomers.

We are all called to be ready to welcome strangers! This applies outside of church too. Wherever you go, you've quite likely got an agenda. But if you want to be sensitive to the strangers in your midst, you've got to be ready to break from your routine. You could even develop a secondary agenda – a plan for what you will do to greet any new people you might meet.

In addition to breaking our routine, the arrival of strangers calls us to **make space for them**. As Mary and Joseph discovered, there is never room for strangers – unless we make it! Abraham made space for strangers to rest under his shade tree. There are many ways we can make space for newcomers too. To begin with, we can make space in our conversations. It is easy to be so caught up in talking to our friends that we totally ignore the stranger who is passing by. Why not make space for them, by inviting them into the discussion. You could be talking about anything – fishing, politics, or motorcycle repair – but there is bound to be a way you can draw them in. “Hi, my friend and I were talking about the 500 pound bass he caught last summer. Do you ever go fishing? No? So what do you like to do?” You invite them into your conversation, you let their interests shape it, you introduce yourself, and soon there is room for the stranger. Or maybe it's not a conversation but an activity in which you need to accommodate a new person. So many things we do become traditions; habitual patterns that those of us who are insiders know well, but which are a mystery to outsiders. If you get up and make an announcement that the men of the church should talk to Ken Morse about the bus trip to Kirkmont, then you better explain what Kirkmont is, and make sure our guests know who Ken Morse is and how to get a hold of him. Or if you're having a party with an obscure name, say a Ceilidh for example, you better explain to the stranger what that is all about. And maybe we could start to think differently about some of our activities. We've got some small groups that have been together for years and are very close – which is great. But is there no way you can extend hospitality to newcomers and make room for them? Or, it may be hard to plan a Vacation Bible School or meal that is open to whatever

strangers might show up, but can't we make it a priority to find a way to do that? God calls us to make room for newcomers. Jesus meets us in the strangers who come our way.

We are also responsible for **taking care of strangers when they show up**. Strangers are always in need: they need to fit in, to be understood, to feel welcome, to be accepted, to be respected, to rest, to heal, and to grow as children of God. We all have these same basic needs, and hopefully, those of us who are already part of this faith community are having these needs met on some level. But when a stranger shows up in our midst, they have yet to experience any of these benefits of our Christian community. It takes effort for us to help meet these needs. Note how Abraham and Sarah provided water to wash and food to eat to the weary travelers. So, when we encounter new people, it's important to listen to them and to what their needs are. Chances are good we can help with many of them. But there is no one size fits all solution. Some people might benefit from our ministry of healing prayer, but some might be ministered to by attending a class, or having a Stephen's minister, or just by being part of a social group. The point is that every person comes with their own unique needs, and when we encounter a stranger, we need to be on the lookout for what those needs are so we can minister appropriately to them.

The Scriptures invite us to **Create a safe place** for newcomers: To be a community of faith in which we always willing to break our routine for the sake of a stranger; in which we make space in our conversations, activities and plans so that they can be involved, and in which we make a serious effort to minister to their needs. In some churches, people resist this aspect of our calling. They fear it will lead to the neglect of current members, but nothing could be further from the truth. When you make room for the stranger, you grow in the image of God; your understanding and compassion are stretched, and your spirit is enlarged. You become a better person, and grow in your ability to care for all, whether they be new friends or old. It is to our benefit to show hospitality to strangers. If you read the story of Abraham and the strangers to its conclusion, you will discover that he and his wife Sarah were blessed beyond anything they ever could have imagined, all because they showed hospitality to the strangers. God will also bless us when we recognize the newcomers in our midst as brothers and sisters - as fellow children of God, as companions on the path of spiritual discovery – and welcome them with open arms into our community of faith. There was no room at the inn for Joseph and Mary and Jesus – but when Jesus comes to us in the person of a stranger, let him find room in our congregation and in our hearts.