

Love the Guest

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Luke 21:25-36

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Advent and the Christmas holiday are a time for guests, it is a time of home-coming, a time to open our doors, to let the carolers in, to welcome the neighbors, to share cookie recipes. It is also a time to open our hearts, to send cards, to visit, and to offer gifts. Love the Guest is on the way.

In Advent expectations run high. It is the end of the year. The spotlight is on. We have a short window in which to do the right thing: to get the right gifts, to finish up school work, to perform pageants, to sing anthems, to send cards, to get to parties or family gatherings, to look our best. We don't want to blow it. This can be stressful. It can get to be too much. A little boy in the Christmas Pageant was chosen to memorize the angel's message to the Shepherds. He was so frightened by his assignment, that instead of "It is I, do not be afraid..." he delivered these words, "Here I am...and I'm scared to death!"

That is why it is important to settle back, calm down, look deeper to seek the real meaning of the season. Of course, I am preaching to the choir - you are the ones who are here, in church! I should go out and preach to the folks online or at the mall! In the weeks ahead, we await the coming of our Savior, Emmanuel, the presence of God in our midst. We look to the fulfillment of ancient prophecies of the arrival of the messiah, the link between heaven and earth, the incarnation – spirit in matter - one who will restore the harmony and symmetry of the universe, bringing us back to a right relationship with God and all of creation. The culmination of this in the birth of a poor, peasant child, in a forgotten corner of the world – a guest seeking love and shelter.

Did you ever notice that virtually everyone in the Christmas story comes from the outside needing hospitality? Almost everyone is without a home, searching for something secure, looking for a return to the familiar and a safe harbor, for shelter, for some sort of rest or refreshment or hope. They long for a home.

Mary and Joseph are forced to travel to a strange town, Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, but certainly not where he is known or welcome. No one takes them in, even with Mary due to deliver. They are turned away from all the inns and hostels, and have to settle for a bed of straw in a cow stable.

Shepherds watch sheep on a barren hillside under the night sky, which can't be mistaken for a home. They are poor wanderers, homeless peasants, dirty, smelly and shunned by all.

Wise men journey from distant lands, foreigners, with money but suspicious and distrusted. The language is not their own. They are far from their homes, away from all that is familiar and safe. Yet their quest carries them onward, following a star.

The hope of these travellers, these wanderers and the uprooted is for a place of fulfillment and safety and rest. They share the feeling of Bilbo Baggins from the story *The Hobbit* by J.R. Tolkien: Bilbo says, from the darkness of Goblin tunnels under the Misty Mountain: *"This is the dreariest and dullest part of all this wretched, tiresome, uncomfortable adventure! I wish I was back in my hobbit-hole by my own warm fireside with the lamp shining!"* (The Hobbit, p. 189) Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz clicks her heels together three times: "There's no place like home. There's no place like home." This is what the stranger, the outcaste, the wanderer longs for, hopes for, especially as the dark and cold settle in...to be welcomed as a guest, to find a warm nest.

Henri Nouwen writes: *"Our society seems to be increasingly full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm. But still - that is our vocation: to convert the hostis into hospes, the enemy into a guest, and to create the free and fearless space where brotherhood*

and sisterhood can be formed and fully experience. When hostility is converted into hospitality, then fearful strangers can become guests, revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. In the context of hospitality guest and host can reveal their most precious gifts and bring new life to each other."

By becoming hospitable, by opening ourselves to the guest, we open ourselves to God. This is what church is meant to offer – an open door, a hand-shake and not a fist. This is deeply embedded in our traditions. In the book of Deuteronomy we hear: *The Lord your Godloves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Deut 10:18-19). In Matthew 25 we hear *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me."* (Matt 25:35) It is sad that in our time so many are distrustful and rejecting to immigrants and strangers who are woven into the fabric of our society.

Christ comes to us as guest, as someone unexpected and from the outside. Jesus was dependent on the hospitality of strangers. Jesus teaches how to be hospitable, showing generosity and kindness to beggars and the rejected, healing the blind and casting out demons. The Savior teaches us to open our hearts, the doors of our soul, so that we can welcome the outcaste. This guest may be a person who needs shelter, or food or a cup of tea and a listening ear. Or the guest may be a new colleague at work, a new baby, or an unexpected friendship or teammate. When the stranger, the guest is welcomed, then we discover surprising new possibilities and insights. We are called, in this season to open ourselves to what is new, awesome, mysterious. And by doing this, we find unexpected blessings, miraculous open doors for our own growth and joy.

A man whispered, "God, speak to me" and a meadowlark sang. But, he did not hear. So, then he cried "God, speak to me!" And, the thunder rolled across the sky. But, he did not listen. The man looked around and said, "God let me see you." And a star shined brightly. But he did not notice. And, he shouted, "God show me a miracle!" A life was born. But he did not see. So, the man cried out in despair, "Touch me God, and let me know you are here!" Whereupon, God reached down and touched the man. But, he brushed the butterfly away and walked on. Don't miss out on blessings because they are not packaged as we expect. Let us welcome the guest, open our hearts, and listen to God.

We are called, in this season, to welcome the guest, to open our doors and ourselves to what is new, surprising, fresh. And by doing this, we find unexpected blessings, miraculous open doors. Christ calls us to stop our wandering and to find a home.

Let me share with you a true story by Jeannie Ecke Sowell. She writes:

This is a family story my father told me about his mother, my grandmother. In 1949, my father had just returned home from the war. On every American highway you could see the soldiers in uniform hitchhiking home to their families, as was the custom at that time in America.

Sadly, the thrill of his reunion with his family was soon overshadowed. My grandmother became very ill and had to be hospitalized. It was her kidneys, and the doctors told my father that she needed a blood transfusion immediately or she would not live through the night.

The problem was that Grandmother's blood type was AB-, a very rare type even today, but even harder to get then because there were no blood banks or air flights to ship blood. All the family members were typed, but not one member was a match. So, the doctors gave the family no hope; my grandmother was dying.

My father left the hospital in tears to gather up all the family members, so that everyone would get a chance to tell Grandmother good-bye. As my father was driving down the highway, he passed a soldier in uniform hitchhiking home to his family. Deep in grief, my father had no inclination at that moment to do a good deed. Yet it was almost as if something outside himself pulled him to a stop, and he waited as the stranger climbed into the car.

My father was too upset to even ask the soldier his name, but the soldier noticed my father's tears right away and inquired about them. Through his tears, my father told this stranger that his mother was lying in a hospital dying because the doctors had been unable to locate her blood type, AB-, and if they did not locate her blood type before nightfall, she would surely die.

It got very quiet in the car. Then this unidentified soldier extended his hand out to my father, palm up. Resting in the palm of his hand were the dog tags from around his neck. The blood type on the tags was AB-. The soldier told my father to turn the car around and get him to the hospital.

My grandmother lived until 1996, 47 years later, and to this day no one in the family knows this soldier's name. But my father has often wondered, was he a soldier or an angel in uniform?

Love the Guest is on the way. If we open our doors to the stranger, the guest, we find unexpected blessings. We can transform suspicion and hatred into life-giving community. As we take communion this morning, let us be guests at the table, and allow the Christ to welcome and host us and to show us the fullness of God's love. Happy Advent! Amen.