

Trinity United Methodist Church, Iron Mountain, Michigan
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, July 29, 2018, 9:15 a.m.

During this second half of the summer, we are considering the many different ways in which God communicates with...us. The God as the Holy Spirit speaks to us As individuals in our private times of prayer and listening, out in nature, as we listen to beautiful music.

God also speaks to us as the church through the wisdom of the Scriptures and through stories of people in the Bible. There are many times in the Bible when visitors...strangers...people from far away appear and reveal God's intentions. Let's remember this a.m. the 3 who visited Abraham and Sarah when they were old, advanced in age and after they had been faithfully following God's direction for many, many years.

Old Testament Reading Genesis 18:1 - 8

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.
Abraham 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.

Now we hear another story from Scriptures of Visitors from far away who brought gifts...this one is from Matthew...

Gospel Reading Matthew 1: 1 – 2, 9 - 11

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,
"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?
For we observed his star at its rising,
and have come to pay him homage."
...and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,
until it stopped over the place where the child was.
When they saw that the star had stopped,
they were overwhelmed with joy.
On entering the house,
they saw the child with Mary his mother;
and they knelt down and paid him homage.

Then, opening their treasure chests,
they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Message

'Visitors from Afar'

Pastor Geri Hamlen

Visitors from Afar...are you surprised that the Wise Guys from the East are showing up in July? Yes, a little unusual...but it never hurts to remember, at any time of the year, the extremely unusual circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus...our Savior and friend.

Because it's July and because it's 2018 in America, I deliberately skipped over the political part of this story from our Gospel reading? Did you notice that? Not a word about that awful King and his political manipulations and paranoia and intrigue.

That's OK to do, you know. Sometimes, as we try to understand God's teachings for us, it becomes more clear when we set aside the larger context and focus on the interaction between the people in the Bible—the strangers and those who greeted them. Other times, of course, we need to tend to the larger picture and all of the many moving parts but for this a.m., it's OK to forget the politics and focus on how God uses visitors to announce God's intentions and to bring us gifts! Gifts like the Wise Ones brought to Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus.

Some of the gifts from strangers are a little puzzling. What on earth would a baby do with frankincense and myrrh? But we know, that as the life and death of Jesus unfolded, those childhood gifts were pointing to his anointing by the women...both hair and feet and the preparation of his dead body after his bloody death on the cross for us. Some gifts take a while to ripen and develop.

For example...I've been thinking about people who take in foreign exchange students. Have any of you ever done that? I touched base with Diana Hunt because I know that she and Greg and their family have welcomed student visitors from afar over the years.

It takes a lot of courage to invite a high school student from some other country into your home. What a huge adjustment for the and for the family...language, eating habits, rules. Diana told me that over the years they have had Students from Finland, the Netherlands, Germany and South Korea. How's that for hospitality to visitors from afar? The gifts she received were things like:

1. Appreciation of the simple things. They brought their exchange student on day to Pictured Rocks to see the beautiful rock formations. Who knew that she would be so giddy and excited about...squirrels!
2. Two of the girls from Germany spent a day or two at Marilyn Phillips house while the Hunts had to be out of town and the big thing for those girls was swimming the Menominee River. Must have been low that summer...and actually getting to the other side and touching Wisconsin. Something about that freedom to cross rivers and borders was so special to those girls. We don't know what kind of restrictions they lived with in their country but Diana saw the gift of joy for freedoms that we take for granted.
3. Friendships that have lasted...weddings and Facebook.

These are the gifts that God wants us to receive from each other...renewed awareness of the beauty of the world. Gratitude for freedoms. Love and friendship. These are gifts that can enlarge our very hearts and souls. Gifts that can transform our outlook and our lives when we open ourselves to visitors from afar. That makes God happy.

As Paul says: *'Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.'* Romans 15:7

My friend Gloria...high school, retired and looking for useful activities.

Through her Unitarian church, Social Justice Group she was invited to a gathering, a meeting in connection with other churches...the Mennonites, the Quakers, perhaps some Methodists? That was where she learned about sponsoring a family from the Democratic Republic of Congo through an organization called RefugeeOne in Chicago.

Gloria and her husband Jack, along with other people, decided to be in relationship with a family from DRC who had to travel through the jungles and over rivers to escape violence in their home country. The family found their way to Tanzania and this family spent 17 years in a Refugee Camp. The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, plus the Church World Service work directly with the US State Dept., Homeland Security, FBI, CIA etc. etc. and after 17 years were able to bring these visitors from far away to Chicago where the RefugeeOne program helps provide housing and partnerships with area churches.

I talked with Gloria yesterday about the challenges and the gifts that have come to her and Jack as they welcomed these strangers to America. She said she has received 10 fold, the gift of being welcomed into their lives. They share their food with her. They give her hugs and smiles. They show her love and give gifts of art work and crafts...because there are community programs sponsored by the RefugeeOne people that help the family learn the language, meet other refugees from other countries, acclimate the kids to the way of doing things here in America with clay-do and markers and paints and sidewalk chalk. And the sponsor families, like Gloria and Jack, are invited to participate in Community events as well as sharing birthdays and Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations. It kind of sounds like she was adopted into a great big new family. What a gift that is!

In fact, she told me that in the refugee community, within this family that she knows, a lot of the children and the adults have a huge extended family...but not by blood. Because life is so precarious in so many parts of the world. People disappear and die...so children claim older adults as their grandma and grampa. Whether there's a blood connection or not. Adults claim each other to be sisters or brothers...because of affinity, shared geography maybe---coming from the same area, a sense of understanding about similar tragedies.

Gloria and I are at an age...and maybe for some of you it's the same way...where we've lost our parents and grandparents. We don't have any living aunts and uncles anymore. These strangers from far away places are showing Gloria the gift of created families in the midst of refugee camps and the transition to a new life in a country that isn't all that excited about having them here.

The Apostle Paul reminds us: *Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.* NIV Hebrews 13:2

Gloria told me that some of the teen-agers who were born and grew up in the refugee camps are some of the most talented and gifted young people she has ever known. Art work and music/singing especially. One young man she knows through this family is being considered for a position in the young artist's program at the Art Institute of Chicago. What an honor. His paintings are amazing and she said he also sings like an angel...he sings so much better than he talks.

Angels appear even in the heartbreak of hearing the younger children talk about how their parents were shot at. The adults don't talk so much but you know how kids are. They will tell you their life story if you give them time and attention. Stories of Dad being Stabbed. Held captive. Gloria said it was a lot to take in but the family has so much joy and gratitude. How can people who have been through so much be so happy?

How can they keep from dwelling on the past?

How can they stop themselves from living like victims?

How can they stay cheerful even knowing that there are those who consider them intruders and criminals and less than human?

That's pretty miraculous and in some part, I like to think perhaps it comes from their Christian background. They know that Jesus came to set the prisoners free. The father is a Pentecostal Christian and the mother is actually a Methodist. She recognized the cross and flame on a church when they were taking a drive one day. This is a family that knows that God has the power to transform even the worst possible life situation into something useful and even beautiful. They know that Jesus calls all of us...no matter what...to give food to the hungry, to provide drink to the thirsty and to welcome the stranger. (See the cover scripture.)

Cover verse: Matthew 25: 36 ...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me....

Yes, Jesus said that...and he was affirming the words of Isaiah 58:6. 7 – 8.

Is not this the path that I choose...

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
to bring the poor and homeless into your home,
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.*

*Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry for help and he will say, Here I am.*

Yes...hospitality, visitors from afar...are God's way of creating opportunities for us to hear God's answer to our cry for help. What Lord, is it that you would have us do? Help us Lord... We can be assured that the day will come when we hear God say...Here I am. Follow me.

That kind of thing is happening here closer to home...just so you know. It's a real thing when God makes a way clear and provides a path to follow.

Dickinson County has become home for maybe 100 Puerto Ricans over the last six months. My understanding is that Grede's brought them in to work at the foundry. They walk to and from work for the most part...that will get trickier come winter.

They have been living in the hotels and as they put together some money, some of them are moving into apartments, that I'm aware of. Wives and children are starting to come and join them, I believe.

Friday I got a call from our sister church in Norway, Grace UMC who is putting together a combined worship service. Today. With Bethany Lutheran over there. They share a building and once a month worship together. Today they are going to have a picnic together afterwards and...they invited some of the Puerto Rican people and their families to join them for worship and for the picnic. They invited the visitors, the guests from afar to come and worship and eat and to quit being strangers and have some fun and connection with the community of faith in Norway Michigan. How cool is that? They only had 4 or 5 people who wanted to come earlier in the week but by Friday they were up to 12 to 15...people who are grateful for the invitation. Excited about meeting new friends and maybe new sisters and brothers. People who have gifts to share and stories to tell and maybe even the chance to change the minds and hearts and souls of those who invite them.

Because, when all is said and done, those visitors from far away who cross our path...they are gifts from God. God sends visitors and strangers...to guide us. To point to the next steps and stages of life. Yes, God sends visitors so that we can be changed.

To ignore the strangers in our midst is to ignore the great big world which is everywhere and all around us. To ignore the world is to turn our backs on Jesus Christ. Because God so loved the world that he came to us in the person of Jesus Christ...Not to judge and condemn the world but to save it and us. Jesus too was a stranger and a visitor from far away and there were people then and now who welcomed him, gave him food and drink and companionship. There were also people who ignored him. And people who condemned him to death. Don't let that be us. Let's not turn our backs on the people that Jesus loves. The people that Jesus came to save...

Regardless of the politics that creep in and out of our stories and our decisions and our attitudes...we, as the disciples of Jesus have a higher calling. To welcome those who are different from us. Those from afar who are passing through our lives. To welcome them. To share with them. To open ourselves to receive the gifts they offer and to thank God...yes to say thank you Jesus for showing us the way to love our neighbors, the travelers, the wanderers, the immigrants and the refugees. We, the people of Christ, are called To remember, if we will, that we too have been strangers in need of hospitality and invitation and when the need was there...so was God. God and someone God put there to invite us into this place. I know that happened because otherwise, you wouldn't be sitting here today and I'm so glad that you are.

How great that someone welcomed you into this house of the Lord!

Where we gather and worship and give thanks to God from whom all blessings flow. Amen.

Let us consider these words and thoughts and ideas while the usher collect your prayer cards.