

Genesis 18: 1-10a
Colossians 1:15-28
Luke 10:38-42

The text: a level deeper

Our Old Testament lesson shows us a picture of hospitality. Abraham reached out to the people who wandered by, in the heat of the day. He ran to them and called out to them. He invited them in to sit and rest in shade, in sweltering heat (which we may understand more now). He bowed before them, honoring their presence. He called for water to wash their feet. He brought them bread to nourish them on their stay. Abraham lived to the fullness what the culture's guidelines were for being hospitable to others in such a time.

At the beginning of the passage, the narrator of Genesis gives listeners a preview of what Abraham discovered. The reading begins "The Lord appeared...". As we listen or read, we know that something deeper is happening than just the surface level of the story. It is about more than the hospitality that Abraham shares. God appeared to Abraham, in and through the visitors, whom he welcomed to his home.

Our lives: a level deeper

The Christian life is fundamentally a life of awareness of and openness to God's presence in the world. We believe that we dwell in a world where the material is blessed with the spiritual. Our relationships, and our stories, and our actions involve a plane of existence that is difficult to see or touch from afar.

I think that's part of what draws us all to whatever church we may attend. We seek ways of honoring the sacredness that we sense. We long to know true

forgiveness and love, and to answer God's call to each of us. We come to this place to ask questions and seek answers, to be fed by God in word and supper, and to grow in understanding and faith with one another. God promises to be with us when we gather. We meet God here, in the faces and voices of one another.

It's great to do all that among people whom we see regularly, who we know at least a bit. Yet this is not how it happened for Abraham. He met God in three strangers who passed by. They were complete strangers – people whom he did not know at all.

God comes to us in these kinds of unexpected ways – in people, in situations, in organizations, in inspirations. Sure, God appears in the familiar, speaking through our family members, friends, class-mates and coworkers. Yet God also appears in relationships that are unplanned and totally new. It's always a risk to welcome new people into our lives, and to truly see and hear them as sisters or brothers. Through them, God may give us a blessing. Perhaps it's the simple blessing of a distraction from whatever holds our attention or causes us stress. Perhaps it's companionship and friendship, whether momentary or life-long. Perhaps it's God speaking of unrealistic, unexpected promise, like the aged Sarah having a baby – which we know was indeed fulfilled. Perhaps it's the fulfillment of a promise that God will be with us, whatever we are going through.

God Calling Emanuel's

How wonderful when we experience these blessings in our lives! They may be small, but they are signs of God's love for us. This same awareness of and openness to God's presence, among and within us, is important for our congregation, too. It's just a bit different when our body only gathers at certain times and places.

In Abraham's example of hospitality to God, I hear a special call to Emanuel's. We witness Abraham's energetic welcome to the three visitors. He ran to meet them, and called out to them. He extended an invitation and a welcome that they would not want to refuse.

We usually welcome guests well into our worship on Sunday mornings. I think that is a spiritual gift of Emanuel's. But, like many Lutherans, we often wait for people to come to us, to enter our space before any invitations are made. We tend to think more like, "We are here – they will come." It's possible that approach worked in previous times, but it doesn't work now. Just think about the number of people in our surrounding neighborhood – and in the neighborhoods where we live. How might we act more like Abraham? How can we meet people where they are walking already – step alongside their journeys, and call out to them?

Often Lutherans are glad to form a committee – another group of people to deal with these questions. But these are things that concern us all. As Christians, we have been drawn into Christ's ministry of love for the world. There are many facets to that ministry – today we're just focusing on how Abraham opens up part of that to us. We, the people who are here, and our friends who are traveling, need only look around with open eyes. To see our neighbors as fellow travelers on our spiritual journeys. And to invite them into the life that we share.

This week we had three nights of Vacation Bible School here in Bellevue. It was a shared ministry with three other congregations, all of them Presbyterian. The people who helped lead, teach, and care for the kids came from all four of the churches. Many of the kids came from our congregations. Yet the people who attended did not necessarily have a church home. They came because they were

invited. They came because parents care about their kids, and how they understand God and the world.

At Friday's VBS picnic, some of Emanuel's kids handed out flyers that invited people to come to Emanuel's Family Movie Night on Sat, July 31. You may have seen this listed in our newsletter or bulletin. I saw one lady who very much appreciated the invitation. She seemed excited and said that she and her kids would probably come. In that moment, Emanuel's extended a hand and an invitation.

There are many concerns about the fate of our church. What will happen with our congregation? For many of us, it feels like an anxious time, wondering about the future. While we do that, we let God pass right by our tent. Our congregational life continues. This summer: we have worshiped each Sunday; our kids have been going to camp; we are participating in leadership for two sessions of Vacation Bible School; members join for opportunities to serve; we will gather for a movie night, and a church picnic. We continue to live the Christian life of faith together. As we discern and worry about the future, we may miss opportunities to extend real invitations to others.

With new relationships, we never know – it might be for just a visit, it might end up a lifetime. They may already be familiar with the story of God's love in Jesus Christ, or it may be new. They may be able to support the congregation financially, or with their time, or they may not.

No matter how we invite, or whom we meet, we reach out with a couple of hopes: That they would be blessed by the ways that they meet Christ through us; And Abraham reminds us that others, whether we know them or not, may serve as a vessel for God's word and love for you or for me. I wonder what blessing God has waiting for us?