

Entertaining Angels

delivered by the Rev. Lawrence Wood, 2 March 2008

One day Abraham was sitting at his tent, the same tent that he always traveled in, with his wife of many years, taking in another hot day like so many other hot days, when three strangers came along.

It might not have looked like a very promising encounter. These dusty men could have come to take the livestock. But Abraham received them with great hospitality – offering water for their feet, a place to sit down, and a meal of bread, curds, and cuts of beef.

After these wayfarers finished their meal, they promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a child.

Now, that was the least likely news of all. Husband and wife had pretty much given up on that. A child! What a joke! It was quite a joke, indeed, yet after this hot day, the days would be very different.

I wonder how many other homes the strangers had visited before finding welcome here. Perhaps many people had seen only dirty, possibly dangerous men instead of angels.

Their blessing wasn't a reward for hospitality – it's what they had come to give; but Abraham and Sarah would not have received it had they not received them.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” says the Letter to the Hebrews, “for some thereby have entertained angels unawares.” It's true – there are marvelous presences who come to bless us; if we pay attention, sometimes they entertain *us*.

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It wasn't a hot day, but a cold January day last year when a young man in jeans and a T-shirt came to a subway station in Washington, D.C. and set up next to a trash basket. It was 7:51 in the morning, the start of rush hour. He opened up his violin case and began to play.

Not too many people took notice. They carried newspapers and briefcases, cell phones and iPods, cups of coffee. They hurried on to buy magazines and lottery tickets from a kiosk. Hardly anyone stopped to enjoy the music of this busker.

No one could have known that his violin was a Stradivarius, fashioned out of spruce, maple, and willow in 1713, when Antonio Stradivari was at the height of his powers. It last sold for \$3.5 million.

The violinist was Joshua Bell, acclaimed as one of the greatest musicians of his generation. Tickets for his performances fetch \$100.

He had chosen to play Bach's “Chaconne” from Partita No. 2 in D Minor. Like many other musicians, Joshua Bell considers it “not just one of the greatest pieces of music ever written, but one of the greatest achievements of any man in history. It's a spiritually powerful piece, emotionally powerful, structurally perfect. Plus, it was written for a solo violin.” It is also one of the most difficult pieces in the whole repertoire.

Johannes Brahms, in a letter to Clara Schumann, wrote:

“On one staff, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind.”

That’s what Joshua Bell played. Let’s listen:

The congregation heard a brief performance by Ashya Meshberg

As Joshua Bell played for 43 minutes, 1097 people passed by. Only seven people stopped at all; he never drew a crowd. Some people stood three feet away and never even looked at him.

He says it was a strange feeling, to be ignored. He was grateful when someone tossed him a dollar instead of change.

As bystander later admitted, “Yeah, I saw the violinist, but nothing about him struck me as much of anything.”

One person, however, says, “It was the most astonishing thing I’ve ever seen in Washington. Joshua Bell was standing there playing at rush hour, and people were not stopping, and not even looking, and some were flipping quarters at him! Quarters! I wouldn’t do that to anybody. I was thinking, *Omigosh, what kind of a city do I live in that this could happen?*”

Altogether, for his 43 minutes of playing in the subway, Joshua Bell made the grand total of \$32.17. Some people had tossed him pennies.

A few weeks later, he received the Avery Fisher prize of \$75,000 as the finest classical musician in America.

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We don’t often treat each other as wonders – don’t really stop to pay attention and hear each other’s heartsongs.

How easy it is to take a seat on the train and ride an hour in silence...or to shop for groceries and say not a word to other shoppers...And by contrast, how good it is to come here and really pay attention to each other!

A life of faith can help to train the senses. Sunday after Sunday, we get a little practice at absorbing the concerns and the messages that surround us. If it’s so hard for us to hear each other, imagine how much harder it is for us to hear God!

Even in the days of Abraham and Sarah, God’s voice could have been softer than a whisper. It took faith and courage for them to discern God’s promptings, for them to leave their settled home in a city and wander the wilderness as aging nomads. And they must have had second thoughts when these three well-worn travelers approached their tent, without even a child nearby to defend them.

God is better than any of us can imagine – better than even Abraham and Sarah could imagine. They had no idea that these guests could bring such good news.

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some thereby have entertained angels unawares. Because human beings bear God's image, the strangest folks may become uncanny angels to us.

Take a look around just now at the others in the meetinghouse. Do you really know all the good in their hearts – all the pain in their hearts? Do you really know their heartsongs?

If we fail to recognize the divine in those we know well, think how much more we must miss in strangers. Who knows how many pass through these doors without our noticing? Thank God that some, as they enter our lives, if only for a moment, do grace us.

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Some years ago I served a church that had just gotten a new grand piano. Just a day or so after we had taken delivery, one of the longtime members, a real estate agent, asked if it was all right if a friend of his came over to try it out. I said sure.

So a little later, in they came – my well-to-do friend and this really scruffy character. His hair was rumpled, his teeth were rumpled. He might have been living in those clothes for a week.

My friend introduced me to Randy. “Randy,” I said. “Welcome.”

Randy couldn't wait to be past the pleasantries so he could sit down. He rummaged in the keyboard as if he were looking for a fresh pair of socks – finding a melody here, a melody there, segueing from song to song. Most of them were from well before my time, but I did recognize a few.

“That's Stardust, isn't it?” I asked. It went on for quite a while, through several changes. This particular performance of it was so gentle and personal, so revelatory, it was as if he owned it.

I said, “He plays it like he wrote it.” My friend laughed and said, “Well, you're close. That's Hoagie Carmichael's son.”

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It's true – there are marvelous presences who come to bless us; if we pay attention, sometimes they entertain *us*.

There is someone here today who has come to bless you. Listen very closely, and find out who it is.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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