

**Divine Intersections, based on Gen. 18:1-15 and Matt. 10:40-42,
David Jahnke, 6/29/08**

In today's Old Testament passage, Abraham and Sarah receive strangers into their home and hear good news. And in the gospel passage, Jesus tells his disciples that anyone who receives them will be blessed in the same way that the disciples are blessed by the Lord. While we often think of hospitality as a blessing to the visitor, these passages remind us that the host is equally blessed through warmly receiving others.

The passages point to a critical theological foundation to all of this. Abraham's visitors appear to him as men but we know that the Lord is among them. And Jesus tells his disciples that though they are men, anyone who welcomes them really welcomes him and therefore welcomes the Lord. So whenever we visit someone or whenever someone visits us, we ought to think of these times as divine intersections-- times when God happenings take place.

There are so many things which work against such an understanding. When Sarah hears from her visitors that she will bear a son within a year, she laughs cynically at the possibility of an old, tired woman like herself becoming a mother. She grumbles to herself about being denied this blessing up to this point and how in the world could it happen now?

Here is one reason why people have a hard time believing in divine intersections. Their own life experience combined with how they interpret that experience makes it difficult to believe.

One of my undergrad religion professors told me about welcoming Jehovah's witnesses into his home. But as he smiled his wry, cynical smile, he implied how he enjoyed gently picking apart their arguments with his logic and his knowledge. This professor's worldview and theology (if it can be called that) relied almost entirely on human experience which he interpreted rationally. His mind was not open to the tensions and paradoxes which come with believing in divine intersections. So he tended to laugh at the idea of an active and living God which was distinct from and shaped humanity, history and culture.

And while mainline protestants profess belief in God as a living Spirit, we often do not interpret the world according to that belief. Ours is still primarily an age of reason. So we are trained to view the world rationally rather than theologically and spiritually. We look for worldly cause and effect which is, obviously not a bad thing. But then we are also uncomfortable looking beyond rational explanation in order to interpret how God is at work in our lives. And I hope that that any of us who, like my professor, inwardly smile with skepticism or cynicism at evangelicals and charismatics will be able to gradually open themselves up to life in the Spirit.

I did a home visit this last week. And I saw on a kitchen chair in this church member's kitchen a copy of The Watchtower, a Jehovah's Witness pamphlet. Another Jehovah's witness example...I wish I had examples of Presbyterians knocking on doors to share

their faith. Anyway, I was tempted to tease the member a little about the pamphlet. But I knew I shouldn't. And actually, I couldn't since I like to page through the Watchtower myself when I come across one in a doctor's waiting room or an airport.

He told me a couple of Jehovah's witnesses stop by his house from time to time. And he always welcomes them in, which is exactly what Christian hospitality demands. Knowing this member, I can imagine him gladly chatting with these folk about life, in general...and also respectfully listening to them talk about their faith. This is an example of true openness to the Spirit of God in others-- even in those whose tradition is rather different from ours.

The professor I mentioned before— to his credit, would have agreed that it's fine to conceive of meeting the divine through hospitality to those who are different from us. He was a good post-modernist in this regard. But I think that because the word "God" was only a concept for him, it was hard for him to fully receive others who were very different from him,; especially anyone who had a "pre-modern, superstitious" worldview.

Belief in an incarnational and therefore inter-personal God, on the other hand, means that everyone we meet is a potential bearer of God in word or deed and must be gracefully received as such.

Jesus said that those those who do so will receive a reward. So as we open our hearts and homes to others, we can expect something good to come our way on many levels. First off, there is a reward in hospitality itself. Doing good is always a blessing unto the doer. Secondly, a divine blessing can come from the visitor in many different ways, as I have alluded to.

I mentioned how this can be hard to discern because of our disappointing experience or our rational point-of-view. Another stumbling block may be the visitors themselves and how judgment can cloud our perception of them.

I am going to go on a bit of a tangent but I'll come back around. Have any of you ever taken prednisone for sinus infections or other reasons? I have had to be on this medicine from Hell (at least to me) a few times. While it opens up my lungs and my sinuses, it does the opposite to my spirit. It constricts it. So evil in the world, in others and in myself gets magnified as my spirit constricts and I become depressed, cynical and irritable.

C.S. Lewis points to how the devil does not need drugs to do this to our spirits. Lewis' wonderful book, The Screwtape Letters, is full of fictional correspondence from a senior demon whose name is Screwtape to his junior whose name is Wormwood. Each letter offers advice about how the less experienced demon should proceed in turning his current "patient," who is a new Christian, from a budding faith to faithlessness.

One thing Screwtape suggests is that Wormwood must shine light on the faults of other Christians around the new convert. He writes, "When your patient is at worship make his

mind flit to and fro between an expression like ‘the body of Christ’ and the actual faces in the next pew...Provided that any of those neighbors sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins or odd clothes, the patient can quite easily come to believe that this new religion is ridiculous.”

Maybe we have not yet come to the conclusion that our religion is ridiculous...but all of our faults can easily lead us to doubt that a perfectly loving, perfectly righteous, perfectly everything God actually resides in all of us and wants to speak and act through us. But in this regard are we any different from the band of disciples that Christ gathered together? His church has never been a gathering of the perfectly righteous but rather a gathering of sinners who believe that God has made a home for us, despite everything.

Christ is, in fact, the world’s hospice. He is the one who welcomes all who feel like they do not have a home— he is the one who provides rest to the weary and shoulders the burden of the downtrodden— he is the one who provides compassionate care for all of us terminally ill sinners.

Because Christ is our hospice, our own expressions and acts of hospitality are critical to overcoming brokenness, doubt and cynicism.

This really hit home for me when I was in Turkey just a few months after September 11th, 2001. I was on a travel seminar which followed the journeys of the apostle Paul who, of course, depended almost entirely on the hospitality of others.

The first or second night we were there, some of my seminary friends went wandering around Istanbul. And they went into a Turkish rug store where they met a couple of really cool brothers. If these brothers have not already received a blessing, they have one awaiting them...due to the incredible hospitality they showed to us traveling disciples of Christ.

The next night, these brothers were opening a sushi restaurant/ discotheque overlooking the Bosphorus Sea and they invited my friends to the grand opening. I tagged along. Talk about hospitality— free sushi and drinks and pleasant conversation in a glass-walled restaurant overlooking a sparkling body of water with Europe on our side and Asia on the other. But that is not the end of the story.

After our tour of this magnificent country, we met up with the brothers again back in Istanbul. All of our classmates were flying out the next day but my friend and I were staying in Turkey a few more days before flying over to Italy for a week. One of the brothers said that he was going to the countryside for a few days and offered us the keys to his market-side apartment and told us we were free to stay there while he was gone...

It was quite a gesture of trust and kindness. I am not sure if these guys were angels or just men. But this was the pinnacle of a month of hospitality right after 9/11. And this helped us all to see that there is nothing that cannot be overcome by a spirit of openness, grace, trust, and loving care.

So let all of us begin by opening up our hearts and homes to one another on a more regular basis; and through gathering week after week in the home that we share. And then with time and a growing trust in God's promises and in their fulfillment in Christ...who knows the great things God will do for and through us.

Now to the one who can do more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in Christ Jesus and the church, now and forever more...And the people of God say...

