

St. David's Presbyterian Church
8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 18, 2010, 11 a.m.
"The Sacred Side of Jazz"

Psalm 150
Genesis 18:1-10a
Psalm 15
Colossians 1:15-28
Sermon: "God's human face"
Rev. John C. Duff, Minister-in-Association

Abraham and Sarah pitched their tent by the great trees of Mamre. Who were they?

They had been called out of familiar surroundings to journey by faith to a land of promise. They were set apart to be parents of descendants beyond number, like the stars in the night sky, and in God's purpose they and their descendants would be both blessed and called to be a blessing to people everywhere.

As we meet them in the story read for us from Genesis today, Abraham is in front of his tent and notices three men standing nearby, like travelers arriving unexpectedly. Abraham's instincts are those of a good man in his Middle Eastern culture – he welcomes them. He offers them water to wash their feet and invites them to rest in the shade of the great tree which was also a place of refuge for him and Sarah. He calls on Sarah to bake bread and arranges for his servants to slaughter a "choice, tender calf" so that a feast might be made ready. He serves his unknown guests a fine meal of milk and cheese, bread and freshly roasted veal.

The feast reminds us of the one prepared for a lost son in Jesus' parable, who returned as if a stranger from a disastrous venture in a distant land, and finds himself welcomed with a warm embrace, a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet, a feast prepared with the slaughter of a fatted calf, so that the return of a son could be celebrated with music, and dancing, and great rejoicing.

This underlines for us how deeply ingrained in Middle Eastern culture is the instinct to welcome and offer hospitality to the stranger and sojourner who comes to us as a vulnerable one, with empty hands.

This same instinct for offering hospitality to the stranger has strong roots in Newfoundland culture also, as the events of September 11, 2001 disclosed. In Gander and the communities around it, and here in St. John's, traveler's stranded in their journeys from Europe to destinations in North America because of terrorist attacks in New York and Washington were welcomed into school gyms, community centres, church halls, and private homes. Here in St. David's people brought sleeping bags and air mattresses, and almost 70 people slept in our church hall for several days. The arrival of strangers evoked from people who offered hospitality, responses that were astonishing in their generosity and grace. The teen-aged sons of neighbours of St. David's came to see what they could do and rounded up fans all up and down the street so that guests could be more comfortable in a crowded gym on a warm night. Our guests were served breakfast, lunch, and supper, with the ingredients and the helpers arriving in a spontaneous way that was

something beyond anything that any one person or committee's planning could have devised. The gym down the street opened their locker rooms so people could have showers, and toothbrushes showed up from dentists' offices. In the midst of it all there was even an impromptu concert here drawing on the gifts of musicians who had been on the flight, and those of local people wanting to lift the spirits of people for whom this was such an anxious and confusing time. I well remember that on the Sunday morning after September 11th, with some of our guests from afar present in church with us, a young man--related to one of the musicians with us this morning--who had accompanied some of our guests on various errands and even for games of golf during the week, played jazz on his saxophone in church as an astonishing offering of faith and hope in a deeply troubling moment. What he played was Louis Armstrong's "It's a Beautiful World". It left us speechless. It demonstrated the power of jazz to help people rise from agony, celebrate kindness and caring, and reach for glory. We are so grateful for all the musicians who are sharing their gifts with us today and helping us offer our praise to the Lord.

After that September 11th experience, though the travelers thanked their hosts for the blessing that our hospitality had been for them, those who had been helping could not but feel that we had been in touch with something larger in those days, something that had been a wonderful blessing to us.

The strangers welcomed by Abraham and Sarah brought blessing to their home. They came as the human face and human voice of God, as messengers bringing a message of astonishing good news. Abraham and Sarah, long childless and now advanced in years, would have a son. In that son there would be a visible human way for God's promise to Abraham of many descendents who would be both blessed and a blessing, to be fulfilled. Sarah laughed at the thought, and that became part of the wonderful story also, so that when their son was born, he was called "Isaac" -- "God laughs".

It was surely with this story in mind that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament wrote, more than a millennium later,

"Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." (Heb.13:2).

Clearly that author believed that the blessing Abraham and Sarah received as they offered hospitality to the men who arrived at their tent, was not something that happened just once, but something that spills out beyond the pages of the Bible and happens in the lives of caring and faithful people again and again.

Offering that kind of hospitality involves taking a risk. The things you might have planned to do that day have to be put on the shelf while you attend to this unexpected opportunity. The strangers might not always be gracious, or grateful. If they are vulnerable, in reaching out our hand to them we become vulnerable in our own way also. Yet we take that risk because of the possibility of a moment such as many of us experienced in that week of September 11th, the possibility of an encounter that brings rich blessing to the lives of hosts and guests alike. In such a moment, we may experience God's human face.

Christians believe that in the coming of Jesus, God was disclosing God's human face intently, and uniquely. In the Gospel of John we read of Jesus' coming as a "Word" from God, who "became flesh, and made his dwelling among us." John says, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth . . . No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." (John 1:14, 18).

Jesus accepted hospitality as he walked among us. He let a Samaritan woman coming to the well draw water to quench his thirst. He let tax collector Zaccheus serve him a meal. He let a woman come in from the street and wash his feet with her tears of gratitude, and dry them with her hair. He let another woman come with expensive perfume and anoint him with it. He accepted the offer of a little boy on the hillside in Galilee who was ready to share his lunch of five loaves and two fishes with him. He was blessed by these ministries, but those who offered him these things received rich blessing themselves, and made possible the extension of blessing to other people.

The story of Jesus taking that little boy's lunch and multiplying it, so that his few loaves and fishes served to feed five thousand men, along with women and children, on that hillside in Galilee, is symbolic of how blessing can be multiplied many times over when we open ourselves to recognize the vulnerability of another, and make ourselves vulnerable as we reach out our hands to meet their need.

It's interesting that John's Gospel, which opens in awe of the blessing to be experienced in meeting Jesus himself face to face, points at the end of the book to the blessing yet to be experienced by people who never met Jesus face to face. The Risen Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

So we are turned to thinking about how the reality of God disclosed so powerfully and intently in Jesus of Nazareth comes to us now. One hint to this is in Matthew's Gospel, in a parable in which Jesus pictured the day of our final accounting before him as king, and says to some of the people standing before him,

"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you . . . For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." And his hearers are astonished, replying, "When did we ever see you hungry and feed you . . . a stranger and invite you in . . . sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King replies, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Jesus is saying that his face, God's human face, is there in the faces of the vulnerable and the needy all around us today, that the reality of God's human face will be plural and not singular, experienced in our meeting face to face with the vulnerable ones who are our neighbours. Mother Teresa said of the dying destitutes to whom she ministered in the streets of Calcutta, that each one was to her "Christ in Distressing Disguise", and invited others to know the blessing she experienced in reaching out in the way she did, serving them as serving Jesus himself.

Being open to respond to another's need is risky. Being a disciple of Jesus is a risky business. It is not safe or predictable at all. It involves exercising freedom, the freedom of letting go of having everything under control, and letting God, and our neighbours, surprise us. And today we open ourselves to the possibility that jazz can give expression to that riskiness, to that openness to surprise.

I have always been amazed watching jazz musicians play together, taking turns at solo improvisations. What amazes me is not just that the soloist is free to explore all kinds of different ways of putting notes together. It is also that the other players play in such a way that everything works together and nothing they do infringes on the freedom of the soloist's improvisation. The players take risks handing off the leadership from one soloist to the next, and may be surprised at the twists and turns that the next player brings to her improvisation. There is excitement and freedom in that, like the excitement and freedom of opening yourself to the possibility that as in Christ we share our human vulnerabilities and meet one another's human needs, we might find ourselves feeling more free, more alive, and more in touch with God's presence than we have ever felt before.

The passage we read from the letter to the Colossians touches on this kind of experience. For this writer, Christ has transcended every boundary of space and time, and "in him all things hold together". The reality disclosed in Jesus now fills the universe. And that reality enlivens God's people also. There is a mystery, that the reality uniquely revealed in the face of Jesus Christ is now made known in the people that belong to Him. The reality of Christ in the world is now something plural and multiple. God's human face is now a wounded woman in Haiti after the earthquake singing "Hallelujah" while lying on her stretcher, and the faces of doctors and nurses and volunteers who have come to Haiti to heal her wounds and help her rebuild her home. It is the face of a member of this congregation who listens to the troubles of a fellow member during coffee hour after church, or of another who comes every week to make a garden here beautiful, or an afternoon for seniors something special. It is the face of a preacher calling for justice, and the face of a politician who acts justly. It is in the faces of singers and musicians who look at one another for cues and make melody together. It is the encouraging face of a mother, and the trusting face of a child. It is the curiosity in the face of a scientist, ingenuity and patience in the face of a teacher, and the wonder in the face of a student who has just put together in his mind something that was only puzzling fragments before. The human face of God is the plural face of humankind coming fully alive as we open ourselves to one another's vulnerabilities and one another's gifts. It is ever changing, ever surprising, ever new, as jazz can be. It comes out of the seeds of suffering, and it reaches for life and hope.

The fullness, the freedom, the surprise, of life in Christ, is God's gift to us. May we be open today to God's Spirit making music in our lives that is free, and surprising, and yet which all holds together in Him. May we be open to our part in the rhythm and harmony of the music-making, even the jazz, that God might have in mind for us yet.

AMEN.