

Strangers Among Us
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Lord, be with us in this moment, help us to put our priorities in order; so that we may faithfully serve you by serving your people. Heal our spirits. Enable us to follow your ways all the days of our lives. AMEN.

Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

When you are 22 year old newlyweds fresh out of college with consistently less than \$20 in the bank, you tend to watch your pennies. This can be really depressing, especially when you received awesome kitchen accessories as wedding gifts!

Ingredients cost money... and paychecks were small for a banquet hall bartender and a security guard. So we scrimped and saved before we could hold what we considered to be our first formal dinner party. Once we could afford it, I called our closest friends and invited them to dinner. That was my job.

Clark's job was to cook. Because, I'll admit it, after years of working food service he is a much better cook. He still is!

Before leaving our tiny apartment to go to work that day, I set the table: a new linen tablecloth, my grandmother's china setting, cloth napkins with stylish napkin rings. We expected five guests. Clark had the day off so he stayed home and prepared the meal.

On the menu was Chicken Pasta Santa Fe. Clark first cubed the chicken, then tossed it with paprika, sage, oregano, garlic and chili powder before he sautéed it with a little olive oil, onion and summer squash. He put 3 boxes of tricolor rotini in boiling water until it was tender. He drained the pasta into a very large mixing bowl and poured the cooked chicken on top. He finished it off by tossing it with a generous handful of grated parmesan cheese. Then he opened the door of the oven and slid the bowl in to keep it warm.

For those who would sit around our table, it would be a feast. As underemployed recent college grads living on ramen and peanut butter & jelly sandwiches, we all looked forward to the party. When it came time for the dinner, we all sat down. Clark, as the chef, wanted to serve us – and frankly, there was no room on the table for this huge mixing bowl overflowing with food.

So he walked around the table, pretending to be a high class *matre de*, carefully portioning out the pasta onto our plates. He sat down, we all gave a little cheer and began eating. About 5 minutes into the meal, I noticed that I had bitten down on something hard. “What is this?” I murmured.

Discretely, I spit it out into my napkin. It was the bottom part of a very small lightbulb.

“Um, honey?” I showed it to him.

He replied “Oh, wow, I thought I heard a pop when I put that big bowl in the oven to stay warm! Everyone, stop eating! We have a situation.”

It’s when something like this happens that I don’t know whether to laugh hysterically or to cry. So much work and expense to make the very best meal we could for our very best friends. And we fed them glass. Sometimes dinner parties do not quite turn out the way we expect.

In today’s reading we hear another tale of hospitality that takes a strange turn.

The sudden arrival of three mysterious guests at his desert encampment obliges Abraham to provide hospitality. When you live a desert lifestyle, providing for any guests who may come by is important. Your actions towards your visitors may, quite literally, save their lives. You provide a safe space for rest, so that they will not be set upon by thieves. You give them water and food, because it is likely they have run out. You get them out of the blazing midday sun and into your tent, a place of shade.

The perfect host is the one who says, as each guest arrives, “I’m so glad you are finally here!” And when each leaves, “Must you go so soon?” Abraham is the perfect host. When his visitors agree to stay and accept his hospitality, he hurries into the tent. He gives orders to Sarah to prepare cakes from about 93 cups of the finest flour. He commands a servant to find and prepare the fattened calf.

Like Italian grandmothers everywhere, Abraham politely offers just a “little” bread before bringing out a 5000 calorie meal.

It seems these strangers are not there for Abraham, as they ask, “Where is your wife, Sarah?” At this point, the visitor’s intentions toward his wife are unclear. In earlier passages, Sarah is noted for both her beauty and is described as the object of lust (Genesis 12) to the point that Abraham resorts to lying and saying that he is her brother in order to protect her from the advances of men.

But apprehension soon turns into relief. One of the guests promises that Sarah will have a son, a reiteration of the earlier Abrahamic covenant. Sarah has been listening in secret a few paces away. As the woman, her cultural place is a marginal one. She is there to prepare the food, not to participate in the conversation.

As the men ate, Sarah lay on the floor near the entrance of the tent eavesdropping. She hears the man say, “Sarah your wife will have a son,” and she has to stifle her reaction. She heard that story before; for the last twenty-four years, to be exact. But now she is in her nineties, and Abraham is nearly one hundred years old. Several decades past childbearing years, she has long ago given up on the hope.

It hurt for a while to wait and not to receive, to watch her peers raising children and their children raising children. Then her hurt turned to anger, and anger to cold resignation. She is surprised by what she feels now. When she hears the empty promise yet again, it strikes her as . . . well, *funny!*

There’s a version of pop psychology from the 70’s whose slogan was “I’m OK, You’re OK.” With faith, it is different: it is “I’m Not OK, You’re Not OK, But It’s OK!”

When Sarah first laughs, it is the laugh of a cynic. Her long waiting has sapped her of her humor. Take surprise away from your sense of the incongruous, and all that remains is a bitter chuckle. But eventually she is able to have a really good laugh and let surprise back into her life.

And we are invited to do the same. I believe it is when our sense of the incongruity of our lives meets God’s great surprise of grace that we are able to live with the hilarity and joy God intended.

“Is anything too hard for God?” It’s a question which demands an answer.

Answer “yes” the world is shut down, the universe closed, and God is no longer God: benevolent, maybe; kindly and concerned, perhaps; but powerless.

Answer “No, there is nothing that is too hard for God,” and the possibilities are endless.

For a few weeks now, we’ve heard news of displaced people leaving their war-torn homelands for a chance to survive. Europe is ground zero for the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Half of these vulnerable refugees are children.

And I keep having this dream that wakes me up at night. Every time I’ve spoken it out loud, someone has laughed at me... because it seems impossible. What if our church, working with a resettlement agency, provided housing for one family of refugees right here in Monroe? I can’t think of a better community to rise to the task, because we are really good at making people feel at home.

I’ve had a vision in my mind of unexpected visitors. Perhaps you have too. Our ability to be hospitable can increase when we take a risk to welcome strangers among us.

And we’d better be ready to be shaken out of our customary and reliable existence.

Sarah will go through a pregnancy in her nineties, and worse, her son’s adolescence when she is over one hundred years old! Can you imagine?

The question is, do we really want to believe that with God nothing is impossible?

For if we do believe that, we cannot be content to keep living our lives as though everything were normal. Wild and crazy things can happen and usually do.

When God reaffirms the promise to Abraham and Sarah, not only is their faith restored, but their ability to laugh is restored too. One goes with the other. Only the laughers can believe. Only the believers can laugh. So it’s totally OK if you laugh at me and my vision. I’ll wait for you. Remember, the only thing worse than waiting is waiting without a sense of humor. And this time, I think we’ll hold the lightbulbs. Amen.