

Welcome

Who's your favorite alien?

Mr. Spock? Alf? E.T.? Chewbacca? Rocket and Groot?

I've grown up loving science-fiction, and that love has only deepened as I've gotten older. In science fiction, there's a sort of informal divide between "fun" sci-fi - like Star Wars and Guardians of the Galaxy and what they call "hard sci-fi". Hard sci-fi tends to be more believable, based on extrapolations of the best science we have right now. So there're no warp cores, hyperdrives or Awesome mixes.

Aliens are different between the two kinds of sci-fi, too. Fun sci-fi gives us aliens like Spock, Chewy and Rocket. They're basically humans with different skins. They're taller or stronger or smaller or have weird ears or foreheads, and they may speak a different language, but interacting with them isn't essentially different from travelling overseas to another culture - because in fun sci-fi, aliens are still essentially human.

Hard sci-fi is different. Hard sci-fi takes that word 'alien' seriously: what if creatures evolved under a totally different set of rules than Earth has? What if they were so strange, so different, so *alien* we might not even be able to recognize their technology as technology? What if we couldn't even tell if they were *thinking*?

For obvious reasons, we don't get a lot of hard sci-fi movies. But how many of you saw *Arrival* a couple of years ago? It's been hailed as the best sci-fi film of the decade and was even nominated as Best Picture of the year.

Arrival was all about those truly alien aliens who pay us a visit in huge, strange ships that land simultaneously, all over the world. The movie follows a linguist, played by Amy Adams, who is attempting to learn to speak their language.

At the same time, the film is also about humanity, about how we respond to the truly alien in our midst. As you can imagine, it doesn't go well. The film becomes a race against time, with Adams' character trying to discern what the aliens want while the governments of the world, moved by paranoia and suspicion, inch closer and closer to nuclear war.

Could you imagine any truer picture of humanity's reaction to real aliens? A few of us excited by possibility while the rest of the world reacts out of fear and suspicion? That's an essentially human response to the Other.

This is what I love about hard sci-fi. When you don't allow the magic of warp and hyperdrive and awesome mixes, we're left with real humans who have slightly better technology. Hard sci-fi exposes the core of what makes us human and invites us to ask some hard questions.

So, taking the lead from *Arrival*, I want to ask some hard questions today about hospitality. Because even though we haven't met aliens (YET!), we all encounter strangers. And believe it or not, hospitality is one of the key Christian virtues. So today, we're going to explore that impulse we have to be suspicious of the stranger. We're going to see how we can learn to imitate God in the way we welcome - and why that is good for our humanity.

Message

We've just kicked off our summer series, which we're calling "The Way, Way Back". Hopefully that calls to mind summer vacations, road trips and fights over who got to ride in the way, way back of the station wagon. (I know, no one drives station wagons anymore because we got SUVs and convinced ourselves they're different.) This series is all about the things we learn when we're willing to leave home - aka our comfort zones.

We're in the book of Genesis, following the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith as they follow God on road trips of their own. We began last week with God calling Abram to leave everything he'd ever known and follow him. We marveled at Abram's faithfulness as he set out after God with no plan, only a promise. And we began to consider the journey we're all setting out on as well, how God is calling us to move, to go, to follow into a future that will require us to be a different kind of church.

[**Scripture Slide 1**] Today, we're moving a little ways down the road. Turn with me to Genesis 18. God has appeared to Abram several more times, reaffirming his original covenant. He's even changed Abram's name to 'Abraham' as a sign of that covenant.

At this point, Abraham is living as a nomadic herder, but he's pretty wealthy and successful by the standards of his culture. I want to set the scene for you before we dive into the text, because there are several unusual features of this story to be on the lookout for.

First, you'll notice Abraham's hospitality. This is highly unusual in our day, to say nothing of the ancient world. Travelers alone on the road had to fear for their safety, so nobility travelled with hired hands who served as bodyguards as much as anything else. And because there was no way to verify the identity or credentials of a traveler, it was rare to invite a random stranger you met on the road back to your home.

You'll also see Abraham and Sarah prepare a meal in this story. They offer their guests milk and a calf - these were delicacies in a world without grocery stores or refrigerators. In fact, even a person as wealthy as Abraham would only eat beef a few times a year.

Finally, this is an appearance of God to humans. The theological term for this is a 'theophany', and it happens fairly regularly in the Old Testament. What's most interesting about theophanies is the response of the human involved. Typically the human either falls down in worship or they immediately build an altar and *then* worship. I mention that because it's notably missing from this story. Pay attention to what's there instead.

So: this is a story about Abraham's hospitality with a meal. Ready? Let's read about Abraham's strange encounter with God:

The LORD appeared again to Abraham near the oak grove belonging to Mamre. One day Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up and noticed three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he ran to meet them and welcomed them, bowing low to the ground.

“My lord,” he said, “if it pleases you, stop here for a while. Rest in the shade of this tree while water is brought to wash your feet. And since you’ve honored your servant with this visit, let me prepare some food to refresh you before you continue on your journey.”

“All right,” they said. “Do as you have said.”

So Abraham ran back to the tent and said to Sarah, “Hurry! Get three large measures of your best flour, knead it into dough, and bake some bread.” Then Abraham ran out to the herd and chose a tender calf and gave it to his servant, who quickly prepared it. When the food was ready, Abraham took some yogurt and milk and the roasted meat, and he served it to the men. As they ate, Abraham waited on them in the shade of the trees.

“Where is Sarah, your wife?” the visitors asked.

“She’s inside the tent,” Abraham replied.

Then one of them said, “I will return to you about this time next year, and your wife, Sarah, will have a son!” -- Genesis 18:1-10

Genesis tells us right away that this stranger (these three strangers?) is God, but it's not clear that Abraham knows this right away. In fact, you might have picked up as we read how confused the language was. Who was speaking? Were all three "Lord" or just the one guy? And when exactly did Abraham figure out it's Yahweh?

The text doesn't tell us. And while it's fun to speculate (which we'll do in a little bit, don't worry), we might sit for a moment with the ambiguity. What might it mean that uncertainty is *baked into the story*?

If the author had wanted to, he could've clarified everything. But he didn't. He left it ambiguous.

Maybe it's just three strangers.

Or maybe it's God.

Or maybe it's hard to tell the difference between strangers and God.

This suggestion that any stranger might be God in disguise is a powerful disruption of our world of scarcity. Though we have much more than Abraham ever could've imagined, we still live with a sense that there's not enough to go around, that my money may not last till the end of the month, that I have to be careful not to share too much because that means I won't have enough left for me and mine.

At a cultural level, this sense of scarcity is what breeds racism, prejudice and bigotry. We are suspicious of the person we deem to be not like us. Rather than approach them with open hands, we have our guard up. Sure there's not enough to go around, we hoard resources and rights.

Scarcity is the opposite of hospitality. And Abraham had plenty of reason to be suspicious. People didn't usually travel during the hot part of the day. So it's noteworthy and frankly amazing that Abraham responds to these strangers with such radical hospitality.

He treats these three strangers like kings. He promises them a little food to eat while they rest, then prepares a meal fit for royalty - the beef and dairy. And then, Abraham waits on them like a slave. Abraham had plenty of slaves - he could easily have treated them as equals or honored guests and ate with them. But he puts himself in the position of a slave, waiting on them while they ate.

This is a challenging picture of hospitality: that we treat strangers as family, as even closer than family.

That's hard, friends, so it's surprising Abraham does so.

While that's a surprising reaction, it's not the reaction we'd expect from a theophany.

We expect worship, or the building of an altar. But we get neither of those. Instead we get an act of hospitality. A meal.

The rabbis recognize this as an act of worship. Hospitality is the altar. As the Talmud says, "Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence."

That's difficult for us to hear, I imagine. The idea that hospitality is more important than worship rubs us the wrong way. After all, aren't we supposed to put God before everyone and everything?

Well yes, we are. But therein lies the problem: how do we put God before *ourselves*? We're nothing if not self-deceptive. We far too easily make God in our own image. It's part of that scarcity mentality: because we're on our own side, we assume God is too. We assume God looks like us, sounds like us, has the same values we do.

It's not long before God can't challenge us at all. Because we've made God over in our own image, essentially taking God's place and ensuring God serves us rather than the other way around.

But God has a solution to this: an insistence on radical hospitality. God knew when we were created that our hearts were, as Calvin puts it, "idol factories".

So God created us different. And God gave us each other as *gifts* to one another. You are the best means of grace in my life for helping me stay open to God's voice. And I can be the same for you.

How? By insisting that I am your servant. By putting myself below you, assuming the posture of a student, of a child. I quit assuming your differences are weird or strange or suspicious or evil. I refuse to assume my normal is the way things should be, or that I have an exclusive, exhaustive monopoly on truth.

In other words, hospitality is a way for me to learn from you.

That's the beauty of the aliens in Arrival. They came to give us a gift that would transform us, one that would enable us to overcome our differences and become one people, if only we could learn to hear these strange creatures.

And that's the gift of God too: God loves us too much to leave us stuck in our stagnant cul-de-sacs of sameness. So God gives us each other. God gives us a world teeming with different cultures and people and perspectives and every one of them is a gift that helps us stretch our imaginations, to learn and grown and reach beyond ourselves - which is of course where we encounter God.

Hospitality is an act of worship. By welcoming the stranger, we welcome God. This is why, in the closing of the letter to the Hebrews, the writer - no doubt thinking of Genesis 18 - reminds us,

Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! -- Hebrews 13:2

God comes to us as the stranger, ready to teach us if only we will make ourselves able to learn. I wonder too if some of us are scandalized by the idea that Jesus would put himself out in the cold like that. Do we find the idea that God makes himself vulnerable to us offensive? Why did God need to rest in the encounter with Abraham? Why did God need to eat? (In fact, the rabbis insist that the angels only pretended to eat.)

God doesn't need us, so why would God make himself vulnerable to us? Why would God come to us as a stranger, in need of hospitality?

But this is what we see again and again in Scripture. The clearest example is Jesus going to the cross for us, embracing the indignity of death for our sakes. Again and again, God takes a chance on us. Creates space for us to step up, to risk, to try.

In this particular case, God makes himself vulnerable, God places himself in a position of need, God comes as the stranger *so that we can practice being like God*.

Jesus created space, became a servant for us, made a place for us, gave us everything we need.

When God comes to us as the stranger, God is giving us the chance to do the same.

This is why hospitality is an act of worship. When we choose to practice hospitality, we are choosing to act like God. We're acting out Jesus' good news. We're images of God to the world around us.

We can be hospitable because God has been hospitable to us.

We can risk because God took a risk on us.

We can trust because God entrusted us with the good news about Jesus.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We receive God's hospitality that we might in turn be hospitable.

1. Asdf

Assignment + Blessing

Who do you need to welcome this week?