

Welcome

A lot of you know I'm a huge astronomy nerd (and nerd in general). When I was in second grade, I had read all the books in my little elementary school's k-3 half of the library. It took some wheeling *and* a good bit of dealing, but I convinced the school librarian to let me check out books from the 4-6 section of the library. The first one I got was a book on the moon.

Do you know how the moon was formed? The most popular theory is called the *Impact* theory. Essentially, something like 3-4 billion years ago, when our solar system was still coalescing, a planet the size of Mars collided with Earth. As you can imagine, such a collision was cataclysmic for both planets. The other planetoid shattered, and its fragments became the moon.

And poor Earth - the collision set Earth on a trajectory to develop oceans, and oxygen. And life.

That's right - without our moon, life would look very different here. We wouldn't have tides (or werewolves!).

This cataclysmic collision actually created the conditions under which life could emerge on earth.

I want to talk about what happens when people collide today. We've all probably had some people come into our lives, relationships that felt cataclysmic. And, especially if you've had one or two of those encounters, it's easy to become inward focused. Protective.

We're going to talk today about the risk of remaining open. Even in the face of difficult, challenging relationships. Because the truth is: cataclysm isn't the end of the world. It might just be the beginning of something new and beautiful.

God created us to need each other. God created us to need *relationships* with each other to open us up. Choosing to remain open helps us to know ourselves, our neighbors and our God better.

Message

It's November, and believe it or not, we have four weeks until Advent, the beginning of a new year for the Church. Catalyst always spends these last weeks remembering who we are and centering ourselves to do a new good work in this next year.

This year, we're calling our series Catalyst in the time of COVID because our experience of being church together has changed so radically in this last year thanks to the global pandemic we're living through. For the vast majority of this year, we've been worshipping virtually, seeing each other less frequently, able to do less ministry together. We've had to get creative.

So in light of all that, we're revisiting our core values one by one, asking what it looks like for us to be church while we're socially distanced. We began with Friendship. We saw that God makes intentional movements toward us in relationship, and so - even though we're still in the midst of a pandemic - we

can and should make intentional moves toward one another. Friendship takes intention. Last week, we returned to Diversity, celebrating how a diverse Church is God's vision for our whole world. Last week we investigated the rhythms that make Discipleship possible when our frameworks are torn out from under us.

Today, we're exploring our final core value: Pilgrim. This one is tricky - especially the week before Thanksgiving! When we hear Pilgrim here in the US, we usually think of the guys in black hats who arrived on the Mayflower. But the word pilgrim is much older than those pilgrims. A pilgrim is someone who sets out on a spiritual journey. A pilgrim is someone who knows there are some ways they can know God only when they encounter God somewhere else. That's why they leave.

Of course, that presents a particular problem for this pandemic. How can we be pilgrims if we can't *leave*? It's a real challenge, but one that points us toward the heart of the pilgrim experience. After all, travel in-and-of-itself doesn't make someone a pilgrim (if it did, we wouldn't have a separate name for it).

No, the pilgrim is the person who commits to be open as they go, commits to treat the new with hospitality rather than suspicion. The pilgrim is the person who assumes God is present in the stranger, that grace is everywhere. The pilgrim is curious and open rather than critical and shut down.

So yes, it's true we can't go anywhere right now. But we can choose to be open. We can embody the pilgrim even as we're staying home and social distancing as much as we can.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Genesis 18. This is probably the quintessential Biblical story of hospitality in Scripture. It's a story of God appearing to Abraham. It's not the first time - God has already promised Abraham would be a great nation. God has changed Abram's name to 'Abraham' as a sign of that covenant. And 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 body guards 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.

Friends, this *is* the pilgrimage impulse. To remain open. To extend the benefit of the doubt. To suspect that strangers might be God in disguise. That I might have something to learn, rather than something to teach.

This is how, even in a pandemic, we can choose to be pilgrims.

As we move into a time of reflection, I want to invite you to consider the question: what does it look like for me to welcome strangers? Is it a book you've been putting off, one that you know will challenge your worldview? A coworker or friend who you can sense the Spirit is inviting you to take a risk on? A family member you need to give a second chance?

How is God inviting you to be open? To extend hospitality? To be a pilgrim?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us all to the table.

1. What new ideas or perspectives have I been open to in the last month?
2. Where have I found myself shutting down or getting suspicious in the last month?
3. How might I be tempted to shut down or be suspicious in the next month?
4. How can I choose to be hospitable even as I stay close to home in this next week?

Assignment + Blessing