

Entertaining God Unawares Sermon on Christmas Eve 2009

Sisters and brothers, first of all: Merry Christmas to you.

When I was a young pastor-on-probation I had an old colleague in the neighbouring town who claimed that the longer you were a minister, the more Christmas sermons you would have to preach, and therefore the more the Christmas story would taste to you like an old Sunday roast.

What an awful image, I always thought.

And what is more: what a sad thing to say.

I felt sorry for this colleague, felt sorry that he obviously wasn't able to find something new in the story of Christmas every year he read it. And I promised myself that I would never ever think like that. And: I managed to. In those 27 odd years as a Methodist minister I never felt that Christmas and its stories became boring to me. I am grateful for the experience that the Christmas story is always good for a surprise, holding something new in store every year – as it does again this year.

Therefore let me read a text to you which is pretty unusual for Christmas Eve...

Genesis 18:1-15

The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.

He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.

He said, «My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree.

Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant.» So they said, «Do as you have said.»

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, «Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.»

Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.

Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, «Where is your wife Sarah?» And he said, «There, in the tent.»

Then one said, «I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.»

And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women.

So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, «After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?»

The LORD said to Abraham, «Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'

Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.»

Are you surprised? Or did you fear for a moment that I'd lost my mind and chosen completely the wrong text?

Whatever it is that went through your mind, ...I admit this is not at first sight a Christmas story at all. But I will show you what it actually has to do with Christmas.

The letter to the Hebrews has the famous verse: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels unawares.” The writer of the letter to the Hebrews must have had Genesis 18 at the top of his mind when he wrote that. But he got it wrong. For Genesis 18, one of the most brilliantly written pieces in the Bible is not a story about entertaining angels, but about entertaining God.

Abraham is having a siesta when God appears, and when he peers out through the shimmering heat waves of the desert noon, he thinks he sees three human travellers. As the passage proceeds, he never does realize who the strangers are. But he does spring up from where he is sitting to become a model of hospitality. Abraham does not know what he is doing. All he knows is that three strangers have come to his tent in the heat of the day, and he must offer them shade, water for their feet and food and drink. Let us be clear. It could be a matter of life and death: the strangers are on foot in the desert, and it is very hot. If Abraham lets them go on their way without entertaining them, they might die, at least if they are the human beings he takes them for.

True, the meal he and Sarah and the servant prepare is vast, but even that is not unusual. Such hospitality was usual in those days. And still is in the middle east...

Honouring a guest was like gathering honour to yourself.

A recent story from Iraq I saw on television the other night: an international group of people was exploring the human rights situation in Basra, when they came upon an Iraqi woman with her children. Their house was in such a state they had not realised a family was living there. They seemed to have virtually nothing, but at once the woman made them welcome, pulled up some of the floorboards, lit a fire, and baked some cakes. She and her children stood by as the strangers ate.

Why do I relate these stories of hospitality before we set off for Bethlehem? Well, it will eventually become clear. It will change our whole reception of the Christmas story as we have always played it in the nativity plays.

Let us take a closer look at Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth.

The scene Luke paints is not an entirely plausible one. In Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus Bethlehem is Mary’s and Joseph’s home village, and there is no need for them to go anywhere for the birth. Jesus is born at home.

Luke, however, says that Mary and Joseph came from Nazareth and travelled to Bethlehem because of a registration that does not fit with the historical fact at all.

But then, Luke is not a historian but a brilliant storyteller, an artist who precisely put together the elements he needed for a good story.

By putting Jesus’ birth against the background of Augustus and a worldwide census he at once gives the event a world wide significance, and pitches the kingdom of God against the empire of Rome.

When Gabriel appears in the temple to speak of the coming birth of John the Baptist, it is “in the days of King Herod”. By that introduction Luke suggests that

John's significance will be chiefly for the Jews. Jesus, however, will be a man for the whole world, and that world will never be the same once he is born. That is why it is Augustus not Herod, who now is mentioned, and why we hear of a registration of all the world.

Luke does not go into detail about what kind of emperor Augustus is. But it becomes clear that Augustus has the total power over all, especially over these poor people in Palestine who have no say in anything and no authority of their own. Augustus can click his finger in Rome and send a young man on a journey of at least 85 miles to get his name on the precious imperial list. And the girl who that same young man is engaged to has to leave the safety of family and village and travel with him. She is pregnant with her first child. She leaves behind everybody who could otherwise assist her when the time of birth comes close: mother, sisters, friends, women of the village... Many paintings of the Christmas story make us believe Mary travels at least sitting on a donkey, but there is no donkey in Luke's story. We have to imagine Mary walking all the way while heavily pregnant... - not knowing where she would give birth, and whether there would be anyone to help her. In the end Mary and Joseph reach their destination. And looking at the customs of the time and land things are probably not nearly so bad as the nativity plays have given us to understand.

There is no stable in Luke's story, nor is there an inn. The Greek word $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\lambda\upsilon\mu\eta$ which describes the place where Mary gives birth is the word for accommodation or guest room – as is used in the story of the last supper and the upper room.

The question crucial to me is: what scene will the first hearers picture in their mind's eye at the point where Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem? The rules of hospitality are clear: so, those first listening to Luke's story of the birth of Jesus will surely have assumed that Joseph's relatives have taken Mary and Joseph in. They will look after Joseph, and after Mary, too, when her time comes. The women of the family will help, the neighbours surely, too. They may send for the midwife, if there is one in the village. They will not be left out in the street. Not with Mary in her condition. The people in Bethlehem will quickly perceive that the whole thing is not just a matter of hospitality, but a matter of life and death. There is no maternity hospital up the road. If they do not help, Mary and her baby might die.

If we wish to get into the world of Luke's story, we would do well to recall those stories of hospitality with which I began. Having told you what Luke doesn't have literally in his story, let's look at what he actually has! There is a manger, and Jesus is laid in one. But we are of course talking of houses back then in the middle east where the family's animals are kept at night under the same roof. So the manger is not in a stable far away at the back, but it is inside the house, and Jesus is laid in that simply because there is no other space for him with all of them in the "guest room".

Where exactly the birth takes place, Luke does not say.

We may well imagine a small house, a family already living there, a curtained off area for the sleeping places, some more guests maybe... who have also come for the registration.

Think of the story of Abraham and Sarah. Think of the contemporary Palestinians, still famous for their hospitality, despite all their difficulties. And then picture the birth of Jesus in a simple cramped family home, and the new baby put in a manger for safety and convenience.

And I believe the family of hosts have no idea what is really going on. No doubt they will presume the child is Joseph's. No doubt they will have no clue of the meaning of the child born under their roof. Abraham once entertained God unawares, as we've just heard. The relatives of Joseph are doing the same. They are doing it in their own way and in their understandable ignorance of it all. And while doing this, just imagine what they will think when a bit later in the story the shepherds show up...

Will they ever know that they were showing hospitality to God himself? And will they later in the life of Jesus learn that showing hospitality to any human being is as if you are doing the very same thing for God?

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Mathew 25:35-40

Will they eventually understand that nothing is the same again since that little baby boy had spend a night or two in the feeding trough of their animals? Do we?

Christmas seen from this new perspective needs to be understood as a time and an opportunity to show hospitality? Unawares? Not knowing who we host under our roof?

...feeding the hungry, giving to drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoners and welcoming the strangers.

Most of us know who we are going to have dinner with tonight and tomorrow. Most of us know where we will sleep, and whether there is still some place that could be offered to others in our homes.

Would we be open for the challenge?

And then make the very best of it?

Maybe we strike the heart of Christmas best when we simply don't lock up our hearts and homes and schedules for the next few days, but are open to something new and unexpected – never knowing whether our openness will lead us right to the living God.

...who we may see in the faces of all the people we meet tonight, tomorrow and in the next couple of days.

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained God unawares.”

Merry Christmas!