

Genesis 18:1-10a

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."

"More Than Good Manners"

No man is an island, entire of it self;
Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were;
Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind;
And therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

John Donne, Meditation XVII

In the Mediterranean world of Abraham and Sarah's time, the cultural norm was to provide hospitality to strangers. Without the provisions of food, housing, and water, sojourners would perish. In the Hebrew story of faith in which we find Abraham meditating

under the shade of the old oak tree, we learn that providing hospitality to the stranger meant something more. It meant making room in one's heart for the Life Giving, Life Changing, Word of God.

The dynamics of Abraham's hospitality began to unfold when the Lord encountered Abraham yearning for the Presence of God during a heated crisis in his life. Like the character in Dante's Divine Comedy, Abraham may have been confused and lost:

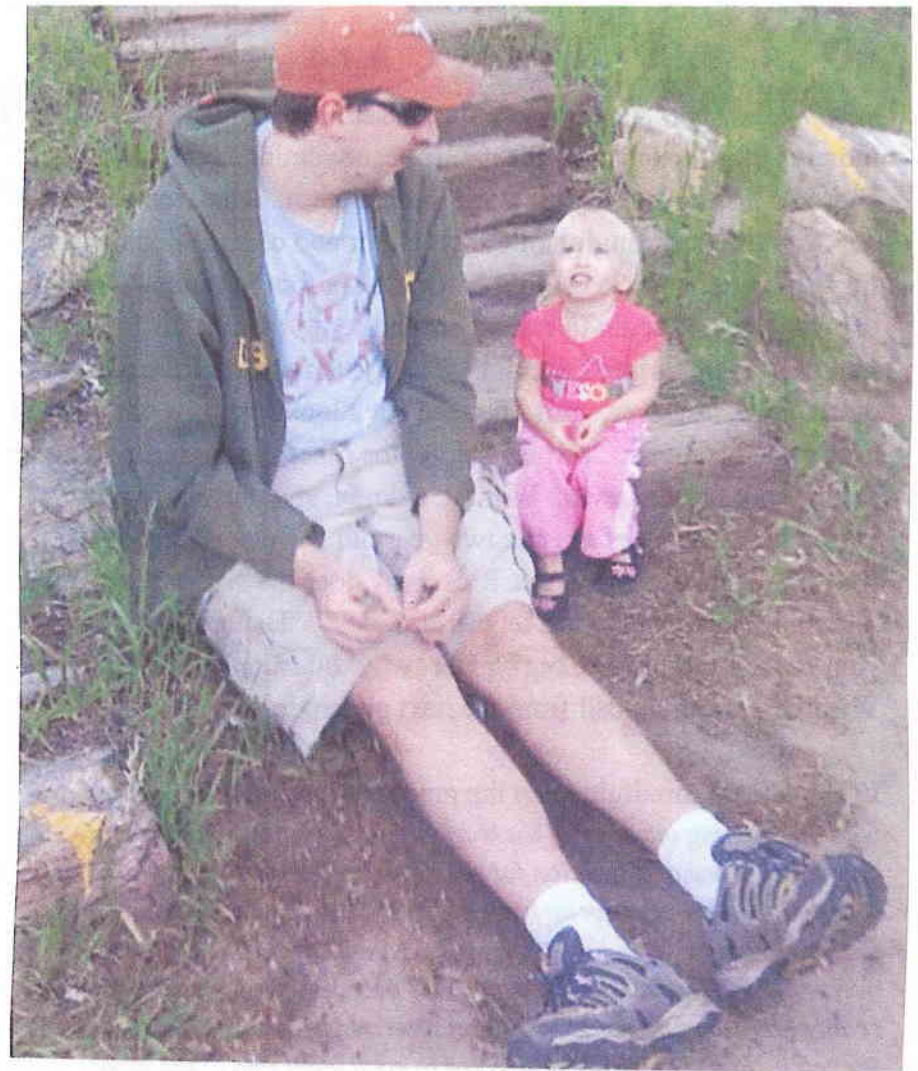
In the middle of this road we call our life
I found myself in a dark wood
With no clear path to follow.

Having compassion upon him, the God of Israel then extended loving kindness to him by appearing at Abraham and Sarah's tent as three strangers. When Abraham saw them, he invited them in. The hospitality that he extended to the messengers from the Lord can be understood as symbolic actions for the internal integration of God's Word.

Humbling himself before God's Word
Watering and feeding God's Word
Washing the dirt off God's Word
Hearing God's promissory Word of . . .
unexpected new life

In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures angels are messengers from God who speak the Word of the Lord to people. The author of Hebrews used this story to help his pilgrim congregation stay on Jesus' way by of eternal life. In 32:2 he admonished them, saying: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Just as I was thinking about Abraham's hospitality to the angelic messengers from the Lord, I received this picture of my son Rick and granddaughter Riley, taking a break together on their hike in the Rocky Mountains.



Although related, they are strangers. He lives in Denver and she lives in Houston. He's big, she's little. He's an adult, she's a child. He's gone to college, she hasn't started pre-school. His feet are huge while hers are exceptionally small. She's an angel, he's not.

In his book, *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen suggests that: *The biblical stories help us to realize not just that hospitality is an important virtue, but even more that in the context of hospitality guest and host can reveal their*

most precious gifts and bring new life to each other. In Rick and Riley's moment of gift exchange, the nature scene reminded me of our church's discussions about taking care of earth. Riley reminded me of Rev. Antal's definition of our neighbor and compassionate care for 'generations yet to be born.' Rick's big foot reminded me that one way we can begin to extend hospitality to the earth is by being mindful of our carbon footprint. The dynamic part of the picture didn't arise, however, until I noticed Rick looking down with loving eyes upon his niece . . . while she, on the other hand, was looking up at him with worried eyes. Without a doubt, she must have been asking him a string of angelic two year old, 'whys.' "Uncle Rick, why is the sky blue?" "Uncle Rick, why does the skunk stink?" "Uncle Rick, why did God let the bird die?" "Uncle Rick, why is your carbon footprint so big?" Her 'why' questions were Earth Wisdom's wake-up call from the next generation . . . to mindfulness.

In Buddhism, mindfulness is the practice of *"examining who we are, with questioning our view of the world and our place in it, and with cultivating some appreciation for the fullness of each moment we are alive. Meditation helps us wake up from the sleep of automaticity and unconsciousness. Mindfulness means paying attention in a way that nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality. It fosters personal transformation and growth and awakens us to the reality that that we are connected to each other and to the world around us"* (taken from *Wherever You Go There You Are* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, p. 3-4). In Abraham's hospitality of entertaining angels unaware, it is mindfulness of his creaturely status, an engaged spirituality of intentionally getting to know the essential needs of all God's children, and a deeper faith in the Almighty's way to bring forth new life in creation. It is the cultivation of 'heartfulness.' Then one of the sojourners said to Abraham, "[] will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah, will have a son."