

Angels Unaware
An Easter 3 Sermon
Luke 24: 13 – 35
Sunday, April 26, 2009
by Dr. Frank Trotter

Two weeks ago on the night before Easter around 7 p.m., a distraught father in Onalaska, Washington reported that his two-year old son, Nathaniel Teafatiller, had somehow gotten the front door of their home open and wandered away with his four-month old puppy, Stanley, while the father was taking a nap. April nights in that part of Washington can still drop down into the 20's or 30's and the child was dressed only in socks and a t-shirt. To make matters worse, attacks on children by cougars and coyotes have been reported in recent years.

When Nathaniel's mother heard the news, she began to cry and soon lost control. She later said, "It was the worst feeling of my life. I have never felt anything like it... Everything horrible ran through my mind... Does he have a broken arm or leg? Is he curled up in a ball somewhere bawling, scared, crying? I had no idea where he was or what he was thinking. I just kept praying to God and asking him to please guide my baby home."¹

Within a short while following the father's distressed phone call for help, police men, firemen, paramedics, as well as over 100 volunteers from the community showed up to look for Nathaniel and Stanley. They searched for five hours and just before midnight, a fire fighter found the toddler about a mile from the family's home. He was huddled up with his dog, cold and wet, but unharmed. Investigators think that Stanley's warmth helped Nathaniel survive.

Was it just a coincidence that Stanley followed Nathaniel into the woods?

On the show, "Saving Grace", which airs on the TNT cable network, the main character, Grace, "would be just another hard-drinking, fast-living...cop, if not for one thing. At one of her darkest moments, [she]

¹ Drew Mikkelsen, "Puppy helps save lost toddler's life," King 5 News, http://www.king5.com/localnews/stories/NW_041309WAB_puppy-saves-boy-life-JM.cfa33173.html.

encounters a stranger determined to change her life. This stranger, Earl, ends up being an angel, who does not give up on Grace.”²

In reflecting on the premise of “Saving Grace,” the editors at www.beliefnet.com, a website devoted to “inspiration, spirituality, and faith,” got to thinking about “divine interventions.” They decided to ask their readers to send in stories that describe life changing encounters with strangers, or perhaps messengers from God.

They received a lot of stories. The story they liked best was sent in by a woman named Evelyn from New Jersey. She wrote, “I was returning from New York City to New Jersey with my mother, my brother, and a friend of his. After getting on a bus, I saw a window seat over a wheel occupied by a gentleman. I expected him to move over, but instead he let me sit there. The gentleman tried to make conversation, but I was tired and not interested. Suddenly, my brother became ill. The gentleman told us he lived nearby and could take us home. We got off the bus and got into the stranger’s car. When we got to my home, my dad thanked him and invited him for coffee. The gentleman and I looked at each other, and we knew our angel had arranged everything. We were married for 30 years before I lost him. We raised three wonderful children.”³ Was it just a coincidence or was her angel the man whom she ended up marrying?

When approached by two strangers in a book store, a young man named Chris found himself bewildered and overwhelmed when they began to ask him question and after question about how his life was progressing and whether or not he was helping other people. What was so surprising to him was that he had been going through a severe identity crisis and couldn’t see where his future was going. Chris says now, “I have since pondered their question daily, *How can I do good for others today?*”⁴ As a result of that intervention, Chris finished college, got a degree in counseling, and is now working in one of the helping fields. Coincidence?

² “Your Life Changing Encounters with Strangers,” <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/TV/Saving-Grace/Your-Life-Changing-Encounters-with-Strangers.aspx>.

³ Evelyn Voehringer, “Your Life Changing Encounters with Strangers,” <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/TV/Saving-Grace/Your-Life-Changing-Encounters-with-Strangers.aspx?p=2>.

⁴ Chris, “Your Life Changing Encounters with Strangers,” <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/TV/Saving-Grace/Your-Life-Changing-Encounters-with-Strangers.aspx?p=3>.

Daniel wrote in saying, “Whenever I meet a stranger, I try to imagine that it’s Elijah the Prophet, as the Jewish tradition teaches.”⁵ When I read this story of how Daniel was raised to be on the lookout for Elijah, I thought, “Ah, now we’re getting into the neighborhood of Luke’s retelling of the mysterious stories that took place following the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

In today’s story, it is still the day of the resurrection. Two of the larger group of disciples and apostles are walking to Emmaus, a village about seven miles away, and are talking about the incredible things that reportedly had happened earlier that same day.

When a stranger suddenly joins them and asks what they are talking about, one of the disciples by the name of Cleopas says rudely, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does that not the things about Jesus of Nazareth that have happened?” The stranger says, “What things?” Then they tell him of how Jesus, their greatest hope to redeem Israel, was crucified on Friday, only three days ago. But something has occurred that had never happened before in their experience! No one quite knows what to make of it! Some of the women are telling everyone what happened when they went to the tomb very early this morning. What they are saying is astounding because the body of Jesus is no longer in the tomb! And they are saying that a vision of angels told them that Jesus is no longer dead, but has risen. When the women told the men what they had witnessed, some of the men didn’t believe them, but when they went to the tomb they found it exactly as the women had said.

As they tell the stranger their news, they remain astonished that he hasn’t heard yet. Does he live in a cave? Then the stranger says, “Didn’t the prophets predict what has happened? Why are you so foolish and slow of heart to believe?” Then he explains the prophecies from the scripture beginning with Moses and the prophets.

In thinking back about this famous story in the Bible, one wonders if the two disciples appreciated *in that moment* the depth of wisdom and authority that they were receiving. Did he tell them anything they didn’t know? Did they

⁵ Daniel, “Your Life Changing Encounters with Strangers,”
<http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/TV/Saving-Grace/Your-Life-Changing-Encounters-with-Strangers.aspx?p=3>. <http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/TV/Saving-Grace/Your-Life-Changing-Encounters-with-Strangers.aspx?p=4>.

suddenly see the light? We simply don't know. What we do know is that while something about him puzzles them, something that they can't quite put their finger on, they still did not recognize who he was.

When they get to Emmaus, the stranger begins to walk ahead as if to leave. In a spontaneous gesture that changes the direction of the story, the two men extend extraordinary hospitality and urge the stranger to share the evening meal with them. When he sits down with them, their puzzlement begins to fall away. Something about sitting at a table reminds them of something... Was it the account of how the Eleven had shared a meal in the Upper Room only four nights before? Then it was that they suddenly recognize that their Lord Jesus is here, with them now! But as soon as their hearts gladden and their eyes light up, he is gone – just as suddenly. They turn to one another and ask, “Did your heart burn like mine as he taught us about the scriptures? Was it then that you began to wonder, as I did, who this stranger was?”

Even though it is evening, they hurriedly leave their place of lodging and walk back to Jerusalem as quickly as they can. Amazingly, the Eleven disciples and the others are still awake though it's early in the morning by now. When they burst in, the Eleven tell them, “You may not believe us, but what we heard earlier is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.” The two say, “We, too, know it is true – for the risen Christ has been with us this entire afternoon!”

This story is a powerful and important story for me. First of all, it is important because I believe that Jesus walks with me, too – even though most of the time I don't recognize him. Secondly, the story is important because it reminds me that the presence of Christ may literally show up in the face of the very next person I meet – and that God may be waiting to see what I will do and say.

The author of Hebrews says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some [of you] have entertained angels without knowing it.” I know and believe that God sends angels to help each one of us, but I can never quite figure out in that moment who the angels are. It has often been in retrospect, however, that I've figured out how God has been reaching out to me.

British theologian Andrew Arterbury says, “In Luke's writings the ancient practice of hospitality – the custom of welcoming travelers or strangers into

one's home and establishing relationships with them – becomes the prism through which Jesus' disciples can view one another and others as valuable children of God.”⁶

Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel talks about hospitality in a different way by saying that God needs not only sympathy and comfort but “partners,” “silent warriors.” We not only need God for help, but God also needs us for help. Heschel writes, “God does not need those who praise him when in a state of euphoria. He needs those who are in love with him when in distress.... This is the task: in the darkest night to be certain of the dawn, certain of the power to turn a curse into a blessing, agony into a song. To know the monster's rage and, in spite of it, proclaim to its face (even a monster will be transfigured into an angel); to go through hell and to continue to trust in the goodness of God - this is the challenge and the way.”⁷

When I was exactly at this point in giving the final shape to my sermon this morning, some members came in the office early and said that a homeless man was causing a disturbance in the parking lot as he asked people for money; one member reported that he had been in the office last week and had caused quite a commotion. On my way to the parking lot, another member told me of his encounter a few minutes earlier where he had been greeted with “a few choice words.”

I went out and introduced myself to him and asked him to tell me what the situation was. He said that he was hungry and needed money for food. I said, “Have you used Union Station⁸ downtown? It's the best equipped place there is to help with regular meals.” He dropped his head and confessed that he had had a blow-up with one of the Union Station administrators and had been told that he couldn't come back. I told him that while I would help him following the service, it was essential that he go back to Union Station and repair the relationship. “You've got to get that into good shape,” I said, “because that's the place that can provide you with meals on an ongoing basis.” Then I shook hands with him again and invited him to come to our morning service – which, to my surprise, he did.

⁶ Arterbury, *Ibid.*

⁷ Abraham Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973], 300-301.

⁸ Union Station Homeless Services, Los Angeles, CA;
http://www.unionstationfoundation.org/understanding_homelessness.html.

I have no idea of knowing whether or not “Alex” is an “angel unaware” to use the words of Hebrews. I have no idea of knowing if, indeed, the Lord Jesus came to First Church this morning, much as he suddenly appeared with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. What I do know is that the presence of the divine in our lives is always possible. What I believe is not only that God is watching to see whether or not we extend hospitality but also whether or not we will become one of God’s partners or silent warriors, to use Abraham Heschel’s phrase.

The author, James Tate, in his prose reading, “Treason”⁹, describes a chance encounter that turns into much more:

The man that was following me looked like a government agent, so I turned around and walked up to him and said, “Why are you following me?” He said, “I’m not following you. I’m an insurance agent walking to work.” “Well, pardon me, my mistake,” I said. “Have you done something wrong, unpatriotic, or are you just paranoid?” he said. “I’ve done nothing wrong, certainly not unpatriotic, and I’m not paranoid,” I said. “Well, nobody’s ever mistaken me for a government agent before,” he said. “I’m sorry,” I said. “You have something weighing down on your conscience, don’t you?” he said. “No, I don’t. I’m just vigilant,” I said. “Like a good criminal,” he said. “Would you stop talking to me like that,” I said. “I don’t want to have anything to do with you.” “You’ve committed some kind of treason and they’re going to get you,” he said. “You’re out of your mind,” I said. “Benedict Arnold, that’s who you are,” he said. “I’m going to a peace rally if that’s okay with you,” I said. “Oh, a peacenik. That’s the same as treason,” he said. “No, it isn’t,” I said. “Yes it is,” he said. “No.” “Yes.” “No.” “Yes.” We reached his office door. “I really hate to say good-bye to you. Would you like to have lunch tomorrow?” he said. “I’d be delighted,” I said. “Good. Then Sadie’s Café at noon,” he said. “Noon at Sadie’s,” I said.

One just never knows what is possible in even a chance encounter, even if all of the initial signs are negative.

⁹ James Tate, “Treason,” from *The Ghost Stories* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008); quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Wednesday, 15 April, 2009, http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=729527&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005.

Howard Thurman, the 20th century African-American poet and writer, has words for all of us in his poem, “The Singing of Angels”¹⁰:

There must be always,
remaining in every life,
someplace for
the singing of angels.
Someplace for that
which in itself
is breathless and beautiful.
Old burdens become lighter,
deep and ancient wounds
lose much of their old hurting.
Despite all the crassness of life,
all the hardness and harsh discords,
life is saved by
the singing of angels.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹⁰ Howard Thurman, “The Singing of Angels”, quoted at “Spirituality & Practice,” <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/books.php?id=16318>.