

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
Danvers, MA  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
June 18, 2017  
Genesis 18:1-15 *The Message*

*(Hebrews 13:2 (NIV) Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.)*

### *“You Never Know”*

We read stories like the one we read to us this morning from the first book of the Torah or Bible and we can't help but wonder what has happened to all the sightings of God in these modern times. We begin to wonder if God has given up on us because we don't have visible visitations like Abraham did that hot day in the desert. As they used to say at Elvis Presley concerts after the show was over “Elvis has left the building.” Some people might think today that God has left the building, too.

Perhaps because of the wonderful and terrible gift of free will that God has given us human beings and because we have used that free will in making choices to hurt each other through wars, and crusades, holocausts, and all the assorted ways we hurt or degrade ourselves and others, God has just given up on the world. There is even a theological theory called “the watchmaker.” In this idea, God created this complex, intricate and delicate watch, wound it up and just let it go--never touching it or interfering with it again. In this theory, God's management style is one of hands off. Of course, watches that need winding eventually stop if someone doesn't rewind them, doesn't care for them, doesn't equip them to do their job. All the working parts just stop functioning. Perhaps we don't see physical appearances of God anymore because God has lost the watch or just lost interest.

If you take the Bible literally, and read about all these appearances of God and God's messengers to the Israelites, and all the interventions of God in the individual and collective lives of “God's chosen people,” than how can people have much faith anymore in these modern times when none us runs across burning bushes that talk to us, or three strangers don't stop by our tents and prophesy amazing things to us?

Today, earlier, we just welcomed Diana, MacKenzie, and Chelsea into membership of Maple Street Church. We welcomed them into our church family. Thank you all very much for joining us! It may (or may not) be as hot today as it was that day that God was visiting Abraham and Sarah at their tent with a couple of sidekicks, but perhaps, as it says in the New Testament book of Hebrews, we have “entertained” some angels today here in this sanctuary. Now, you new members, don’t put too much pressure on yourselves...but you never know!

I look back on my life and think about all the many people who have crossed my path on this long and winding road I have lived. I think of my first grade teacher who scared the living daylights out of us kids but who taught us how to treat each other with respect and with dedication. I think of my bunk mate in Navy boot camp who taught me to keep my sense of humor even in the midst of crazy high pressure demands on me. I think of all the little moments driving in Danvers when I need to make a turn across traffic and the driver coming at me flashes the high beams or waves me on to make the turn ahead of them. I think of the thousands of times people in this church reach out in love and help to someone who has just lost a loved one or who is going through a crisis and helps them out or just lets them know they care. Are all these people, friends, family, and strangers alike, who do something nice for us when its most unexpected, or who teach us some life lesson that changes how we behave towards others and makes our life go smoother or makes our life more meaningful--are they visitations by God or by God’s messenger or angels? You tell me.

How about all those times in your life when someone you have met has changed your mind about something you were so sure of? You believed something about a certain kind of people that made you think less of them, or you thought you were a better person than they were, or because they were so different you just couldn’t understand why they did what they did or were the kind of person they were, or because they didn’t believe what you believed about God and religion you thought they were wrong or worse, condemned by God? And, then, they did something for you or for someone you love or they performed some gift of grace that you saw showed real love, or real patriotism, or real kindness and you began to think to yourself that, hey, maybe I was wrong about that kind of person. Could you then believe that you might have entertained God or God’s messengers or angels? You tell me.

What might it take on our part to open up our lives to be more aware of the times we are entertaining God's angels? What prejudices, or biases, or preconceptions about people, or brokenness within ourselves, might we let go of that could make us more aware in our day-to-day lives of seeing God or God's angels in more places and in more people? What could we change about our rushing from one thing to the next in order to be more aware when God is breaking into our lives and trying to tell us something? What are we trying to control that we might let go of in order to really hear what other people are saying to us, what they really need? What could we seek to learn about a person or a people when we just can't understand why they behave the way they behave or live the way they live in order to see how God might be working through them or even that God loves them, too? You tell me.

Abraham's wife, Sarah, hid behind the tent and scoffed and laughed at what God and the other two were telling him about her bearing a child. Surely not, because she and Abraham were just too old! What could we do so that we don't hide behind the tents we put up in our lives and discount what other people can do, or what we might be able to do, even though they are different than us or we just don't believe we are capable of changing? Too old, too young, just not like us, but who nevertheless can make a difference in our lives. Or, we ourselves think we have too many limitations on us to do that wonderful loving thing that needs to be born in our lives. What can we do as individuals and as a church to recognize the most unlikely angels that we might welcome through our doors? What can we do to recognize within ourselves how we might be changed in ways that open our hearts to the world around us crying out for love, for acceptance, for justice, for fairness, for just being welcomed into a safe nurturing place where they can rest their weary bodies and bruised faith? You tell me.

Be open and listening, my friends, for God appearing in your life. Be aware of God's angels who can teach you something new, no matter who you are or where you are on your faith journey. Make space in your life to really listen to people, to really see the person in front of you. You just never know. Amen.

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