

THE STRANGERS\*

Pilgrim Church, Duluth September 28, 1980 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Jeremiah 14:8

"O thou hope of Israel,  
its savior in time of trouble,  
why shouldst thou be like a stranger in the land,  
like a wayfarer who turns aside to tarry for a night?"

Every neighbor begins as a stranger:

Someone appears who never was anybody before and now they are walking down our street as if they are somebody. They go in and out of a house in our neighborhood, followed by a strange cat, assaulting our ears with the sound of a strange lawnmower and hanging strange sheets in our line of vision.

They who never were anybody, who never before, so far as we could tell, inhabited the universe, are now here acting as if they were somebody.

It is a challenge. Even the good samaritan and the man in the ditch were strangers before they became neighbors.

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A second sort of stranger is ourself.

We wonder much of the time who we are though much of the time we do not care to know. After all, there are a lot of people in the world and we can't get to know them all. It's hard enough keeping up with our spouses and our children, the people in the office and the members of the garden club. These elusive people like ourselves are fascinating, but they take more time and energy than we have to spare.

Maybe, we'll look up ourself when we retire.

Back in the days of Booth Tarkinton, people were always finding themselves. It was the "in" thing to do. Your parents sat back and watched with amusement as you made your way through the maze until at last you clasped yourself to your bosom. If you were fortunate you found yourself by the age of sixteen. At the latest you had to get the job done by eighteen. If you didn't find yourself by then, your parents sighed and sent you to work on uncle Henry's farm.

Starting with World War II, finding yourself began to take longer. External events kept interfering. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack and every so often having somebody run by and bump you in the elbow.

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\*The sermons begin with this theme because "Welcoming the Stranger" was the theme adopted by the diaconate and board of christian education for opening the fall program.

In John Powers' novel The Unoriginal Sinner and the Ice-Cream God, we are told the story of a young man in the 1970's who half a century earlier would have been described as trying to find himself.

Tim Conroy and his friend Weatherly are just about to graduate from college. Tim reports the conversation they held in a cheap cafe on the eve of commencement.

"I was talking to a graduate student last week who's thirty years old. . . he still doesn't know what he's going to do with his life and it's almost half over. You know what he told me? 'Life's a game and you've got to prepare yourself for it.' When you're thirty years old, you're in the game, like it or not. By the time he's ready, the game's going to be over."

"Don't worry about it," said Weatherly calmly.

"I feel this tremendous compulsion to get somewhere," I said, "and I don't even know where I'm going. Some day, I'm afraid I'm going to be 55 years old, sitting on a curb and saying to myself, 'I wonder what I'm going to do when I grow up.'"

Weatherly popped the last piece of crust into his mouth.

"Sounds okay to me."

So then we have two sorts of strangers, our neighbors and ourselves. But most things seem to come in three's and so we have another, the biggest stranger of all.

In the book of Jeremiah, who was a very strange man, we come across a strange figure of speech. In this passage Jeremiah is talking to God, something he seems to do more often than anybody else in the Bible. Other Prophets talk for God, but Jeremiah is forever talking to God; to put it more precisely, he is forever talking back to God.

Says Jeremiah:

"O thou hope of Israel,  
It's Savior in time of trouble,  
Why shouldst thou be like a stranger in the land,  
Like a wayfarer who turns aside to tarry for the night?

It's a good question. The immediate reason for Jeremiah putting the thoughts of his people this way is a severe drought that is going on around Jerusalem. There is no grass, no crop, no water in the cisterns. People want to know what happened to God. Doesn't God live around here any more? Has God become a stranger?

Though the figure of speech is unusual, the complaint in essence is familiar. We've heard it too in our day. God is absent. God doesn't come around much anymore. We must stop talking about God for a while some Theologians say, because we really don't have enough familiarity with God to put God into words.



Now God does not give an immediate answer to this complaint in Jeremiah's book. The passage that follows doesn't really follow. Evidently it applies to another situation. But it might be said that both in Jeremiah and elsewhere in the Old Testament, God answers something like this:

"You say that I am like a stranger who stops for one night in a motel and then moves on. Well, let me say what it is like for me to visit this bit of creation that I made but which you have been despoiling. I feel like a person coming back to the old neighborhood, a garden of fond memories full of beauty and of people caring for one another. But when this person returns home he finds streets full of violence and houses full of vice and pain. One look and he does a U-Turn and tries to forget he ever came back.

"The truth is that though I have never left your world, I hardly know the place any more."

Taking a few liberties and sticking to the stranger metaphor, that is the kind of answer God gives in the Old Testament, so there is an impasse. The people of Israel accuse God of being a stranger and God judges them to be strangers to His purposes. The Prophets look beyond this impasse. Jeremiah himself speaks of that day when God no longer will be a stranger to the people. No longer, he says, will each one say to his neighbor, "know the Lord", for everyone from the least to the greatest will have the knowledge of God written on their hearts.

But still in the Old Testament the impasse remains.

Now come along the New Testament writers and they tell us a kind of parable. God, so the story goes, decided to break the impasse and to make an effort to become more familiar. He would identify more closely with people. He would enter the life of a man. So it was that together God and that man walked down the streets of the world. They went to religious services. They attended wedding receptions. They observed the machinery of human justice. They talked with every sort of person they could find. In Jesus, God the stranger became everyone's neighbor. He came in the hope that as we found in God our neighbor, so we would cease to be strangers to ourselves and others.

Did it work?

No and yes.

"No" says John, because "He was in the world, Yet the world knew Him not. He came to His own home and His own people received Him not." When it was all over most people thought that Jesus was the strangest fellow they ever met.

God's effort to become more familiar did not seem to work. Yet in the next breath John says "Yes it did work."

"But to all who received Him . . . He gave power to become children of God. . . No one has seen God . . . but the Son . . . has made Him known."

Well, what do we make of that?

About 49 percent of the time I say to myself that it is very strange, rather ridiculous even, that after so many years we should still pay so much attention to such an obscure person about whom we in fact know so little and whose counsel we so consistently ignore. Jesus. An important person surely and one we shall not forget. But perhaps it is about time we got on to other persons and other things.

Yet about 51 percent of the time I feel we can't get on to anyone or anything without Him. That great divine experiment of which the Bible speaks is still going on. It is still Jesus who holds to answer to problems of the strangers, the stranger who is our neighbor, the stranger who is ourself, and the stranger who is our God.

As I said at the outset of this year, one of the items I think should be on the agenda of our kind of church in this new decade is the item of facing up to that question that Jesus himself put to His Disciples:

"Who do you say I am?"

So at various times this fall I plan to preach sermons about Jesus. I plan to speak of Jesus the teacher, Jesus the doer, Jesus as presence, Jesus as happening. I am going to avoid as much as is practical the old and rather tired language people used to explain Him in the past.

Last Sunday at the ordination review, it was remarked that we have Unitarians in our church. But what is a Unitarian? I should like to find a man today with a more heartfelt devotion to Christ than that revealed in the life and writings of the father of American Unitarianism, William Ellery Channing.

Such terms as Unitarian and Trinitarian and the like do not help much today. They served their purpose in the past. The issues that gave rise to them continue to be important. But except in classes of historical Theology, much of the classic language devised to say what Jesus means to us has outlived its usefulness.

I plan to speak then in simple and direct terms, lifting up some of the ways in which that strange man from Nazareth continues to bring the strange God near to us.

"Why should'st thou be like a stranger in the land?"

I think God has an answer to that question, and I think the answer has something to do with Jesus Christ.