

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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Proper 9 Year A  
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“What a difference a day makes. 24 little hours.”

It's a song we are all probably familiar with and also must know is a truism. Sometimes a single day, or a single moment, can transform our lives and move us onto a whole new life trajectory. What seemed important yesterday may no longer be; what seemed to be the pre-determined course of life suddenly has vanished and either pales in comparison to this bright new adventure we find ourselves on or pales in comparison to the life we think we deserved. In the blink of an eye, everything can seem unfamiliar.

Sometimes, in a single day or a single moment, we have been made to let go of something that we knew and loved...or at least something we believed about ourselves. We can feel lost and disoriented, for transformation, which is what we're talking about, that is, a radical change within the landscape of our soul, is not a renewal or restoration of our former selves, but rather something made brand-new. And for something to be made brand-new, something else needs to be let go of or ripped away, and that something is often something we love to hold onto.

All of our passages today are about new life: the new life being offered in the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, the psalmist calling the bride away from her home, Paul calling the faithful to begin new lives away from the bondage of sin, and Jesus telling his disciples that in their relationship with him, they will find a new understanding of power and of service. New life, in all of these situations, means becoming a stranger to one's former life, distancing ourselves from who we were, looking at our life from a new perspective, or identifying within the landscape of our soul that which we need to be estranged from, what you need to let go of, all of that which is not of God. This can be an exciting and scary process, and it is always really hard work to allow this transformation to happen. We seem, naturally, to resist this change, but our scriptures give us helpful examples of how to prepare ourselves to do this hard and holy work of becoming a stranger to our old lives. I think it has to do with how we welcome the stranger.

“What a difference a day makes. 24 little hours.” This is true in our lives and can also be said to be true in the lives of the characters in our biblical narratives. We may measure the time span in chapters or verses, rather than days or moments, but regardless of the unit of measurement, there has been a dramatic shift in the lives of the parents of the nation of Israel, Abraham and Sarah, since the portion of the story we read last week. In that text, we were challenged mightily with the portrayal of Abraham marching up the mountain, prepared to offer to God his son Isaac, the one whom was from God, the one whom he loved, and the one whom Abraham saw as the fulfillment of the promise God made to him, that his children would be as numerous as the stars above. Since that passage, in just a short chapter, Sarah has died, presumably of a broken heart upon hearing what Abraham had been prepared to do, and Rebekah's lineage,

Isaac's future wife, comes to the center stage. With Sarah's death, the family of Israel is motherless, yet God intends for that to be merely a brief moment in their history. The narrative focus shifts to finding a wife for Isaac, Rebekah, who we are relieved to find out, is quick to agree to fulfill her role in the divine plan of building this nation.

Abraham's faithful servant, ordered to bring back a wife from Abraham's family for Isaac, with God going before him, meets Rebekah at the well. We're immediately cued in that something dramatic or interesting will happen there, for the well is not only a public gathering place, but often a location where truth somehow becomes revealed and people's lives take a different turn. The well's location is like our baptismal font, which contains the living waters of Christ, for when the water is splashed upon our forehead, or when we touch the basin of holy water as we enter our church, we are expecting a turning, a shift, a transformation. We are expecting and inviting something dramatic or interesting to happen. So, it was at this well in Nabor.

Rebekah is described as a model of hospitality: compassionate and desiring to provide comfort by drawing water for this servant stranger and his 10 camels, and also as an example of good courage, as she later embarks upon the adventure of her life. When asked, she was willing to take bold and vital action at this critical moment, to travel to a foreign land, to meet her future husband, Isaac, and become one of the mothers who said "yes" to participate in God's divine plan. We hear some echoes of Sarah's story: showing hospitality to the strangers in the desert (by baking the bread and preparing the meal for the three divine beings who wandered to their tent) and to becoming one of the mothers in God's divine plan, having taken the bold and vital step to walk out into the desert to find the promised land with her husband Abraham. These stories affirm the role that women played in securing the promises offered to Abraham by God.

This morning, I'm particularly interested in Rebekah's response to the servant who was a stranger to her, not in offering him water to drink, as her extravagant gesture of drawing water for the 10 camels he brought with him was beyond her village's expectations and we know was the test upon which the invitation to become Isaac's wife was strategically set. Her response made me think about what happens to our souls when we stretch to meet "the other" beyond what others expect or beyond what we ourselves may imagine. I'm wondering if the ability to or the action of extending compassion, understanding, sustenance, and generosity beyond normal expectations, beyond our own cultural assumptions, to meet people very different from us, creates a condition within us that strengthens our souls, and maybe those strengthened souls allows us to take that bold action of following the call of God to participate in God's plan. Could it be that her practiced response of extravagantly meeting the needs of the strangers she met at the well created the spiritual strength and muscle which allowed her to respond boldly to God's call? Is there something in her response that we can learn, imitate, or take within ourselves, which will allow us to be transformed into the new life Jesus offers us?

So, let's see how this might play out. I think it's fair to say that it is one thing, and a good thing, to write a check to help someone in need who we will never see. It costs us money, but nothing more.

It is yet another thing, and a good thing, and a deeper form of giving, to provide toothpaste or pencil cases or money for eggs to help the children in need to our area, who remain invisible to us. It costs us time to throw these few extra articles into our shopping cart and a few dollars, but not too much more, not much of our heart.

It is yet another thing, and a good thing, and yet an even deeper form of giving, to provide chicken casseroles, fresh corn on the cob, juicy watermelon, to those who sit around our tables on Monday evenings, smiling cheerfully at them and spooning food on their plates from behind the serving table. This form of giving costs us a bit more, both in terms of the dollars spent and in the hours of planning and preparation, and it begins to cost a bit of our hearts, for we may somewhat unintentionally find that we begin to recognize familiar faces and delight in knowing we've helped them that evening.

It is yet another thing, and a good thing, and an even deeper form of giving, to sit and talk with these people, to learn and remember the names of our guests next month, to lay hands upon, pray for, worry about, provide assistance for those same people. I know the moment, when after coming to each community meal for the past 7 months, that the people who showed up on Mondays became my friends; not our "guests", but people with whom we shared life. I believe we had moved into a place in a relationship that actually mattered to both of us. I felt that we as a parish moved from doing something "for them" to sharing a meal with our friends. That means my heart broke last Monday night when my friends showed up for a meal, which we hadn't prepared for them.

There are costs to this deeper form of giving. For when we welcome the stranger, when we make new friends, we care, and when things don't go right in that relationship, we need to look within ourselves to see what part of us we need to change for God to bring us into this new place. We may need to gain a new perspective that rids us of the presumption that holidays are for being only with our families or close friends, and instead imagine the hungry people lined up outside our doors, hopeful for companionship and a home cooked meal. Sometimes when we welcome the stranger, we find there are parts of us that we have to be rid of. This could be fear, anger, privilege, prejudice, greed, or all the things we find within our spiritual landscape, that are not of God.

On Friday night, we watched the movie *The Shack*, an adaptation of the book which I had read many years ago. When I first read it, I remember being fascinated by the depictions of the three persons of the trinity, and how clearly the author portrayed them as one, for always the others knew of what had appeared to be a private conversation held between Mack and just one of them. This time, what I noticed were the honest questions I've heard many people in my 9 years of ordained ministry: "How could you have allowed this to happen?" "Don't talk to me about love when you allowed Missy and your own Son to die?" But what I connected more to than anything else was the transformation God was asking of Mack, which meant he needed to look hard at what within the landscape of his soul he needed to be estranged from, what he needed to release. For him, whose family experienced the terrible tragedy of his young daughter being murdered, he needed to be distanced from his paralyzing fear, his hot anger, his

fierce judgement, his all-consuming self-loathing, his red-faced shame, and his capacity to shut down love. All of these emotions were understandable and easy to cling to, but none of them were of God, and God was inviting him into a new life. For Mack, God was the stranger he met, as evidenced by the note he found in the mailbox, by “Papa” who said it’s been a long time since they’ve met, and by welcoming God at depth, of becoming friends with God at length, Mack found the parts within himself, within his soul, which he needed to let go of, so that he was able to move into a new life where peace abided.

Sometimes the stranger **we** meet is God, and our path is similar to Mack’s. There is much within our soul we need to let go of.

Sometimes the stranger is our own life, our own work, our relationships that don’t fit, that don’t resonate, that make us soul-weary, which seem futile or purposeless, and we have to look within ourselves, to examine our spiritual landscape and determine what we need to distance ourselves from, in order to take the bold and vital action at a crucial time to move with God’s plan as Rebekah did.

Sometimes the stranger we meet is something that happens to us, like losing our job, and we’re painfully aware that everything within us seems to be strange, and we need to sort out what we keep, what is of God, and what we leave behind to find the next right thing to live out our purpose.

Our gospel story today speaks about people who met first John the Baptist, the stranger, who ate locust and wild honey and whose words were harsh and jolting, and then Jesus, another stranger, who broke social rules and went against cultural assumptions, who loved to party, as long as everyone was welcomed. The gospel is full of stories to people who refuse to respond to what God is doing, who respond negatively to every invitation to embrace the new life Jesus offers them, who would rather sit in the market place and make judgments, fabricating reasons to justify their paralysis, protecting their privilege. They met Jesus the stranger but didn’t welcome him, didn’t do the hard work of seeing what in their spiritual landscape they needed to become let go of, for that would have cost them dearly. They could throw money in the offering plate at the temple, they could have smiled at the poor by the gate, they could have tossed a few coins on the cloak of the beggars and felt good about it, but all that served to build up the barrier in their soul, so they didn’t need to look within and find what needed to go. But our story of Rebekah, her radical hospitality, her welcoming at soul-depth the stranger, her bold action, tells us what is needed to be, as she was, the one who preserved and continued the promise of God. We are that too. In order to preserve and continue the promise of God, we as Christians are called to embrace the new life of Jesus, which is such a gift from God, and to do that, we need to let something else go. When we meet the stranger, whether that is God, the teachings of Jesus, the person walking on the other side of the street, the person in the other political party, the person lined up outside our red doors, the stranger in us is revealed to us, and we are invited to meet it, let it go, and be changed, for therein lies the transformation that Jesus is all about.

Amen.

