

Back in 1985, when I was serving my first church in Stockton, Kansas, an English couple came to stay in Stockton for a few months. The husband, Tony Parker, was a writer on the model of Studs Terkel. He would pick a topic, like lighthouse keepers or murderers, and then he would interview the relevant people and write up the transcripts into a book. He and his wife Margery came to Stockton for Tony to do research on middle America. He had found the geographic middle of the US on a map (Smith Center, KS), come out and driven around, and decided to write about Stockton.

There was much excitement in town about their presence. A reception was organized at the public library, and my parishioners pushed Margery towards me, saying, "The Congregational Church is *just like* the Church of England!" It transpired that they didn't actually go to church, especially not Tony, but we discovered that despite them being older than our parents we had a great deal in common, and we used to get together for drinks and penetrating political analysis. They were appalled at Margaret Thatcher; we were appalled at Ronald Reagan. And we were pretty sure we four were the only such people in town.

Tony used to check with us about cultural questions, like why it is that when you thank someone, that person responds, "Yep." Or whether it was general knowledge how to apply for welfare benefits. Or where the Native Americans were, as he had seen none in Stockton. As he was winding up his work, Tony had to return unexpectedly to England on a family matter, and Margery closed down their apartment and gave us his office supplies, some of which we still have. A few years later he was commissioned to write a biography of Studs Terkel himself, in Chicago,

and they came out to Fargo to visit us, since they were in the neighborhood. They were unbelievably wonderful friends, even more unbelievably wonderful because they had probably saved us from utter and complete loneliness and devastation in the very strange and remote habitat that Stockton was for us.

I bring this to your attention now because this was one of those profound moments when life events and faith intersect so visibly that you almost literally see the hand of God. I am not kidding, Stockton was a very difficult place for us to be. Even at the time I was reminded emphatically of Hebrews 13, “Do not be afraid to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” We showed hospitality to those strangers, and their reciprocal hospitality made it immeasurably easier to adjust to our new environment. They were angels to us (though I’m sure Tony rolls over in his grave every time I say that). I have never been able to forget that, and it is truly one of the reasons I feel so called to reach out to refugees and immigrants. I’ve been shown over and over that when I show hospitality to strangers, I find I’m entertaining angels.

The so-called festivals and solemn assemblies that the prophet Amos condemns in today’s reading are commemorations of analogous experiences that Israel had. Obviously my experience was not as earth-shattering, but it was the hand of God. Israel could identify occasions when the hand of God had touched them, too. The festival of Passover commemorates God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In the annual retelling of the old story, Israel teaches new generations about the joy of God's redemption. The story is a source of blessed memory that offers hope to believers in every age who find themselves enslaved:

God is a God of liberation, and we are grateful for the new life granted to us.

The festival of Tabernacles celebrates the communal resilience that Israel showed in its forty-year pilgrimage through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Having once survived on manna and miraculous water from a rock, Israel is reminded that reliance on God and hospitality to the sojourner are essential for its ongoing spiritual journey. They build little shelters outdoors and symbolically re-live the exposure and risk through which God saw them.

Pentecost celebrates the offering of the first fruits of the harvest and mature grain to God, showing Israel's gratitude for God's abundant gifts. That's why so many people were in Jerusalem for Pentecost after Jesus' execution; they'd made their first harvest and were bringing the top tenth of it to sacrifice to God who had given it.

The festivals and solemn assemblies were and are commemorations of the ways that God has acted in the life of the people. They are not just occasions for platitudes and generic praise. But Amos charges that they have become empty of meaning because the people have stopped making the connection between their religious rituals and the lived realities of their everyday lives. They celebrate their liberation from slavery in Egypt and then act like Egyptians, enslaving others for debts as small as a pair of sandals. At some level they think that they're fooling God, or that that worship is what God gets of their lives while day-to-day life does not matter to God. How else could you celebrate these events and then go do exactly the opposite?

So Amos speaks for God: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight

in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” If they cannot live according to the values of the covenant, they shouldn’t bother worshiping the one who made the covenant with them. Their worship will only mean something to God when the people act justly—which to Amos means, when they look out for the poor and vulnerable in society. A modern-day analogy might be those who say their thoughts and prayers are with the victims every time there’s a mass shooting, but they do nothing to stop the violence.

Part of the reason we celebrate events like the Passover or Easter is so that we will be primed to recognize those events in our own lives. Part of the reason we read the Bible over and over is so we will be primed to recognize its stories in our own stories. Ideally Tom and I would remember just when we met Tony and Margery Parker, and we would have a little liturgy, most likely involving Scotch, to thank God for sending those angels into our lives right when we really needed them. Every time we celebrate Christmas I hope we can remember afresh that God comes to us over and over again, embracing the entirety of our human condition because God is so extremely fond of us. Every time we read about angelic visitation, I hope we realize that angels visit *us* frequently, bearing greetings from God. And vice-versa: we should recognize and mark the sacred events in our own lives, the friendship of the Parkers in Kansas as sacred an event to Tom and me as the manna miraculously produced in the desert for the Hebrew people. Those sacred events happen to all of us, and they set a template for us: every time you worship, know

that the God you worship brought that particular grace to you. Then go out from worship alert again for strangers, because now you recognize the hand of God in bringing you together. Or go out from worship alert again for manna, because now you recognize that you have been sustained in the desert by the hand of God. Go out from worship ready to seek justice and bring about righteousness, because those are the pillars of God's covenant, the covenant that makes us whole.

Let us pray. God of all people,

Show us how to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an every-flowing stream. Create justice and righteousness in us, that all may rejoice in your blessings. Amen.