

JESUS IN DISGUISE

“Come inside,” Robert invited. “I want you to see something.”

I really didn’t want to go inside. To be honest, Jesus doesn’t often come to me in Robert. Plus, I’ve been in Robert and Judy’s apartment a few times, and it’s a big OCD trigger for me. The place is a mess, it has a foul odor, and there’s pet hair everywhere. Robert and Judy almost got kicked out of the apartment a few months back because the HUD inspector said there was too much stuff in the apartment, making it a fire hazard.

But I took a deep breath and went inside.

Robert and Judy are friends from Freedom Fellowship, a mission church where my wife, Jana, and I share life with friends on the margins. Many of

our friends at Freedom are poor and intermittently homeless. Many are on parole or struggling with addictions. Some, like Robert and Judy, have disability case workers and live in HUD housing.

Every week Jesus comes to me in my friends at Freedom, but not so much with Robert. Robert is hyper, talks too much and too loud, and is a bit of a know-it-all. Still, we're friends. And I absolutely love Judy, a simple and innocent soul. Every week after church, because the city buses have stopped running and most of our friends at Freedom don't own cars, I drive Robert and Judy home, along with Henry, Maria, and Josh. We're a motley crew, the six of us crammed into a car. But I look forward to our time together. Henry, Maria, and Josh are Hispanic, so my radio is tuned to 93.3 FM La Voz, a local Tejano station. We crank the tunes, and they educate me about Tejano music and teach me Spanish. We laugh a lot together.

Robert and Judy are the last to be dropped off. And one night, a few days before Christmas, Robert invited me in. "Come in, I want to show you something."

I didn't really want to see what Robert had to show me. The last time I was inside the apartment, I spent a frustrating hour trying to help Robert get a remote control synced with their TV. Robert can't

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read very well, so he needed me. But that didn't prevent him getting in my ear and telling me what to do every step of the way.

But Robert seemed really excited about what he wanted to show me. So I parked the car and followed them to their apartment.

We went inside, and the apartment was the way I remembered it: a mess.

Robert started upstairs and beckoned, "Come upstairs; it's upstairs."

In an effort to embody the Christmas spirit, I smiled and climbed the stairs. When I got to the room at the top, it was dark, and I couldn't see anything. "Wait here," Robert said. "Let me turn on the light." He crossed to the light and flipped the switch.

I blinked and took in the magical canopy that became illuminated above me.

It was stunning. I found myself in an enchanted fairyland. I don't know how long it took Robert to do it, but it was strange, beautiful, and mesmerizing. I was transfixed and at a loss for words.

For days and days, Robert had been tying a thread to every Christmas ornament he could find, and then he tied that string to a thumbtack that he pushed into the soft ceiling, hanging the ornament overhead. He had done this with hundreds of ornaments of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Wall to wall,

the entire ceiling was a thick forest of twinkling light and color.

“How long did it take you to do this?”

“A long time,” he beamed.

I stared, and walked around the room like a child looking up at a starry night sky. I wasn’t sure what the HUD inspector was going to say when he got a look, but I knew what I thought as I walked under that magical Christmas canopy.

“It’s beautiful, Robert,” I said in a hushed voice.

“Merry Christmas, Richard,” Robert said.

“Merry Christmas, Robert.”

We smiled at each other under a sky of twinkling light.

And I was surprised all over again at how Jesus comes to me in disguise.

HOSPITALITY WARS: ABRAHAM VERSUS SODOM

I went to the prison and Freedom looking for Jesus, and I found Jesus in Mr. Albert and Robert. Over and over, I’ve entertained angels unawares.

That encouragement in Hebrews is an echo of the primal story of hospitality in the Bible, the first story where we read about God being welcomed as a stranger. In Genesis 18, Abraham is sitting under

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a clutch of oak trees when three strangers approach. The strangers are collectively described as “the Lord.” Seeing the strangers, Abraham jumps up and welcomes them, inviting them to sit under the shade of the oaks while a meal is prepared.

In church tradition, the three strangers called “the Lord” in Genesis 18 are often taken to be the members of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, where icons play an important part in worship and spiritual devotion, it is not allowed to paint God directly for fear of making a graven image. So the Orthodox iconographers paint God indirectly, by depicting this story of hospitality in Genesis 18 where God is welcomed as the stranger. The icons depicting this story are called “The Hospitality of Abraham,” and the three visitors seated at Abraham’s table are often called the Old Testament Trinity. The icon says it all: God is welcomed in extending hospitality to strangers.

That scene of hospitality in Genesis 18, where God is kindly welcomed, contrasts sharply with the events that transpire in the very next chapter. After the meal, two of Abraham’s visitors go down to the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah on a reconnaissance mission to determine if the wickedness of the towns is as bad as it has been rumored. The visitors have a

simple test: They plan to go to the center of the town and spend the night. How well will the city take care of the people sleeping on its streets?

Hospitality to strangers is God's test of goodness or wickedness.

Upon hearing of this test to sleep on the streets, Abraham's nephew Lot fears for the safety of the visitors. Lot knows what sort of welcome awaits strangers in Sodom and Gomorrah, so Lot takes the strangers into his home. But it's too late. Word of the strangers has gotten around, and a violent mob descends on Lot's house and demands that the visitors be sent outside to be raped. Ultimately, the angelic strangers help Lot escape the angry and sex-hungry mob.

We often think that the sin of Sodom is homosexuality. But when contrasted with Genesis 18, we see the real point of the story: Abraham welcomes the strangers and shows hospitality; the citizens of Sodom do the opposite. *The sin of Sodom is the failure to show hospitality.* Sodom failed to welcome the God who came to them as a stranger.

JESUS WAS A REFUGEE

From Genesis 18 onward, God keeps showing up incognito.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John describes the Incarnation as the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. I like how Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translates this text: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.” The stranger God forces you to be a better neighbor. Indeed, Jesus started out his life as a refugee. Fleeing Herod’s persecution, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled Israel to live in Egypt as immigrants and foreigners. Jesus was that weird foreign kid sitting in the back of the classroom. Zechariah 7:10 says, “Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor,” and now we see why. That refugee is Jesus. God comes to us as an immigrant speaking with an accent.

Another example is in Luke 24. It’s after the resurrection, and two of Jesus’s followers are walking toward the town of Emmaus, perplexed by the reports of Jesus’s empty tomb. Then a stranger appears (spoiler alert: it’s Jesus), but they don’t recognize him. This time Jesus is, quite literally, a stranger. Jesus then explains to the disciples how the Scriptures foretold the death and resurrection

of the Messiah. As the trio draws near to the village of Emmaus, the sun is setting, so the two disciples extend hospitality to the stranger, welcoming him into their home for shelter and a meal. During that meal, Jesus takes the bread and breaks it, and in that moment, in the breaking of the bread, they recognize him. It's Jesus!

We encounter the risen Lord when we break bread with strangers. I experience this every week at Freedom when we gather with friends and neighbors to share a meal before our Wednesday-night praise service. Jesus comes to me in the tears of Mr. John as he shares with me the pain of losing his wife. This happened years ago, but Mr. John experiences this loss afresh each day, as if it just happened. Mr. John has shared this story with me perhaps a hundred times, as he has, over and over again, with everyone else. He doesn't seem to remember that he's told us. Regardless, when we weep together, I am on holy ground.

Mr. John can crack me up as well. Once he had an accident in the bathroom, soiling his pants. He was devastated and embarrassed. As we talked with Mr. John, we worked hard to comfort him, pointing out how sometimes our bodies betray us and let us down. Eventually Mr. John calmed down. He collected himself and reached a spiritual perspective on

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the situation: “You know,” he said, “it’s better to make a mess in your pants than a mess in your heart.” Amen to that! I laughed and heartily agreed. It’s one of the most profound things I’ve ever heard. Don’t make a mess in your heart! Jesus comes to me in these meals with Mr. John.

My favorite example of Jesus coming to us in disguise is in Matthew 18. The disciples are arguing who is to be the Big Boss of the kingdom, sitting at Jesus’s right hand. Jesus takes a child and puts him in the midst of the bickering, power-hungry men. “Whoever welcomes this child,” Jesus says, “welcomes me.” Jesus comes to us disguised as a child, as one of those he calls “the least of these.”

We often miss the power of what Jesus was doing when he set a child at the center of the disciples’ attention, for we live in a child-centered world. Children are the focus of many of our concerns and affections. But that wasn’t the case in Jesus’s time and place. Men were at the center of first-century Middle Eastern culture. And around the men were the women. At the periphery were the children, marginalized and ignored.

So you can see the power of what Jesus was doing. He reaches to the edges of his society, bringing a marginalized person into the center; the

ignored and dismissed are now in the spotlight, the focus of our care, affection, and attention.

Our response to the call of hospitality is to answer some simple questions: Who are the people on the periphery of my life? Who is that person at the far boundaries of my care and attention? Who is being ignored in my workplace and church? Who is marginalized in my neighborhood and nation?

Who would Jesus grab to place at the center of my attention?

Because when I welcome that person, says Jesus, I welcome him.

SAVED BY STRANGERS

I went looking for Jesus out at the prison and at Freedom because I was losing my faith. At the time, I was full of doubts and questions. God seemed distant. I rarely prayed. So when I answered the Men in White in those early weeks out at the prison, I was telling the truth. I came to the prison because I was looking for God. That answer highlights one of the temptations we face in the call to hospitality. When we listen to these stories of hospitality in the Bible, we often get the characters reversed. When I go to churches to talk about hospitality, it's easy for my audiences, as good Christian people, to think that

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when we show hospitality, we are being like Jesus. And no doubt we are. Jesus welcomed tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. We, as followers of Jesus, extend that same hospitality to the outcasts and sinners of our time and place.

But as these Bible stories show, we don't show hospitality to *be like* Jesus. We show hospitality to *welcome* Jesus. In Matthew 25, Jesus isn't the one doing the visiting. Jesus is the one being visited. In these stories, God isn't the host. God is the stranger. Hospitality isn't *being like* God but *welcoming* God into our lives. As Jesus says in the book of Revelation, "I'm standing at the door, knocking." Hospitality is opening the door to let Jesus in.

I wasn't bringing Jesus into the prison or to Freedom. Jesus was already there—in disguise, yes, but there. And so, with flagging faith, I set out to *welcome* the God who comes to us in strangers.

In my first weeks out at the prison, I had to choose the content of my study with the Men in White. As a skeptical, doubting Christian, I was drawn to the lament psalms. The cries of protest and anguish in these psalms of darkness spoke into my own anger and doubt. Where was God in this broken and messed-up world?

Planning my first prison study, I figured if anyone could identify with the cries of godforsakenness and

desolation in the lament psalms, it would be the Men in White. Prison is a dark place. The lament psalms, I figured, would speak into that darkness.

So I started my first class out at the prison on the lament psalms. I began ticking through all the cries of abandonment, grief, and protest—all the psalms where accusations are hurled at God.

But something surprising happened. To this day, it remains one of the most profound and spiritually shattering experiences of my life. I've never been the same since.

I was speaking about the lament psalms, and the Men and White pushed back on me.

“We get it,” they said, “prison sucks. We're aware. We know the darkness, the feeling of abandonment, the godforsakenness. That's our life. So we don't need more of that. What we need in here are songs of hope.”

I was stunned. And speechless. Because at that time, I was in a spiritual hole. I didn't have a lot of sunshine in me. Lament psalms I could talk about, all day long. Doubt I could do, but songs of hope? I didn't think I could sing those.

But that's what the Men in White needed. So slowly over the weeks and months, I started to sing songs of hope and restoration. Monday after Monday, I kept coming back to visions like the one in

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Ezekiel, the Valley of Dry Bones. God asks the prophet a profound question, “Can these dead things come back to life again?” That’s the question the men in the prison were facing in the darkness: Is new life possible? Can anything be resurrected from the wreckage of my life? Can dead things come back to life again?

God’s song of hope in Ezekiel answers yes, dead things can come back to life again. And as I’ve sung that song out at the prison, I’ve gotten swept up in its melody. Slowly, my dead faith came back to life again.

I didn’t bring God out to the prison. God was already there, waiting for me, a stranger God than I could have imagined—a God who embraced me in the tattooed arms of prisoners.

The same thing happened to me at Freedom. For weeks I came and sat in the pews, waiting for Jesus to show up. And just like in the prison, I found Jesus in people like Mr. John, and in Josh, Kristi, Henry, Maria and Robert, and Judy.

And Miss Beth.

Because of all my spiritual struggles when I started going to Freedom, I had lost my capacity for praise and worship, so Freedom came as a bit of a culture shock. The worship and praise at Freedom is enthusiastic and passionate. Hands are raised, we

dance in the aisles, prayer veils are waved, and praise flags lifted up. I was 100 percent a fish out of water.

And Miss Beth, she was at the center of it all.

Beth had lived a hard life. She'd battled years of addiction, been homeless, and had troubled and abusive histories with men. But a few years before I started attending Freedom, Beth had given her life to Jesus, and over time, she became a fixture at Freedom—and then more than a fixture: one of our leaders. By the time I showed up, Beth had taken charge of Freedom's kitchen, cooking, organizing, and directing our weekly meals. When I helped clean up after the meals, Beth told me what to do.

Considerable though it was, Beth's biggest influence on Freedom actually wasn't in the kitchen, it was in the sanctuary. During worship, we dance in the aisles, and Beth had a dance all her own. She didn't like drawing attention to herself, so she stood off in a corner during worship. And there she would open her hands and sway—a movement slow and graceful.

Beth's dance affected everyone at Freedom. That dance gave others permission to move in their own ways. And for my part, Beth's dancing opened my heart. After years in the spiritual desert, I learned from Miss Beth how to worship again.

When Beth danced, she was transformed. She

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glowed. I've never seen anything else like it. When Beth danced alone with God, she was baptized with grace, and her dance was beautiful to watch. As I was struggling with my faith, I watched Miss Beth worship, and I could see the grace of God, real and present, wash over her. How could a person with such a difficult life experience so much peace and joy? And not just Beth, but the entire Freedom community. Whatever Miss Beth and the Freedom community had found in Jesus, I said to myself, I wanted it.

Freedom Fellowship and Beth's dance taught me how to pray and worship again. And it saved my faith.

Last year, Beth was diagnosed with cancer. When someone is poor and doesn't have access to regular medical checkups, a cancer diagnosis is usually late in the game. Soon after the diagnosis, Beth was moved to hospice.

Jana and I went to visit Beth in the ICU before they moved her to hospice. Joe and Becky, our community ministers, were there. Because of the pain and medication, Beth was only sporadically lucid. Jana held one of Beth's hands, and Becky held the other. I stroked Beth's bare foot.

Even in all that pain, Beth was still worried about our Freedom family, worried about if the meals were being taken care of. Becky and Jana assured Beth

that people were helping out, though it would take ten people to replace one Beth.

There were lots of tears. At one point Becky began to softly sing “Blessed Assurance” over Beth, and we all joined in.

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.
O what a foretaste of glory divine.
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.*

*This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long;
this is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.*

It was the perfect song for Beth. *This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long.* No lyrics better capture Beth’s faith and life, the grace that found her and caused her to dance.

Before we left, I put my hand on Beth’s forehead and prayed Psalm 91 over her.

*For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,*

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*so that you will not strike your foot against
a stone.*

After I finished reading the psalm, I stroked Beth's hair. I said good-bye to a woman who had helped save my faith. "Beth," I said, "you are one of the most beautiful people I have ever met."

The following Friday, Beth fell into the arms of the angels.

I went looking for God at Freedom and out at the prison. Trusting in the words of Jesus, I went looking for God in strangers. And I found Jesus disguised in Mr. Albert and the Men in White, in Robert, Mr. John, and Miss Beth.

On the Day of Judgment, we are going to ask Jesus, "Lord, when did we ever see you?"

"I was everywhere," will be his answer. "I was everywhere in disguise."

