



The Stranger

TEXT
Deuteronomy 10:12–19
Matthew 25:31–46

August 18, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie M. Hottle

When I was growing up, my dad always sent us off to school, or the ballpark, or the dance competition — whatever it was, he always sent us off with the same encouragement. He'd say some variation of "Remember who you are." And we'd just roll our eyes: another weird thing Dad says.

There were some years in there when I can remember being overly frustrated by this encouragement. Those teenage years of existential angst when we're all trying to figure out just "who we are" hit me hard. Telling me to "remember who I was" just seemed cruel, when I was certain that "who I was" could be found somewhere in the aisle of colorful hair dye, or with my less restricted friends at the skate park, and that my father was just determined to ruin my self-discovery.

But I admit, in later years, when I found myself a terrified new college student — or in the halls of Princeton Seminary wondering what in God's name I was doing there — this phrase became a place of comfort, even if I still wasn't entirely sure what it meant. *Remember who you are.*

Not much my dad says could be confused as biblical quotation.

But this, this mantra of his, it sounds remarkably similar to an early commandment by God — a refrain taken up by our holy book again and again:

What does the Lord require of you? Fear and follow God. Love God. And serve God with all your heart, all your soul. And remember ... remember, how God blessed your ancestors. Remember that God loved you when you were strangers. Remember, so you will love the stranger in your midst, and provide for the orphans and the widows. Love the strangers, care for those who are most vulnerable, like I have done for you.

Remember who you are.

So today, as we wrap up this sermon series on "People Like Us," I thought we could take some time to remember our story, to remember just who we are.

For there was a man named Abraham. We remember his story. God called him to leave his country and go to a new land. So with his wife and his nephew, he went. And they became strangers. They entered the land of Canaan. God said this was the spot. So they built a little altar to mark it. But they didn't stay long, for there was a famine in that land, no food or opportunity.

So they traveled, crossed the border into Egypt. Egypt was prosperous, situated around the Nile that kept food plentiful. But it's dangerous to be a stranger in a prosperous nation.

Abraham knew his wife was beautiful, and he saw how the Egyptians were looking at her. So he made her tell a lie. He tells her to say she is his sister. That way the men who were looking at her could just take her, without having to kill him. So Sarah is taken away, a new prize to be used by the pharaoh. It is especially dangerous to be a stranger — and to be a woman.

But God was watching — and intervened. God plagues the pharaoh, causes him to return Sarah. And Abraham and his family are deported out of Egypt, gifted with slaves as they go, a message to please not return.

Then there was a woman named Hagar. We remember her story. She was young. She was a long way from her home in Egypt. She might have been among the slaves Pharaoh gave to Abraham as they left. We're not sure.

Her name, Hagar, is not really a name. Surely, at least, not the name her mother had given her. It means "foreign thing," "alien," "stranger." She is such a stranger, we name her for it.

Her masters weren't able to have children. So in desperation, they created a plan to use her. It's dangerous to be a stranger and be a woman. And Hagar became Sarah and Abraham's *forced surrogate*. Seeing her pregnancy, Sarah despises her. So Hagar runs away — young, pregnant, hurting — into the desert.

And it was there, in the desert, for the first time in all of scripture, that God appears. God doesn't just speak. God shows up. God promises Hagar, this foreign thing, that she'll be okay. She can go back, have the child, and God will protect them.

She speaks to God, and for the only time in all of scripture, she gives God a name. She calls God *El-roi* — “the God who sees.”

Hagar gives birth, and her master names her child “Ishmael.” It means “God hears.” And God does.

The animosity between master and servant, it continued. And Hagar ended up right back in that desert, now carrying her young son. Dehydrated, desperate, Hagar lays her crying son under a bush. She walks away, not wanting to have to watch as he dies. She collapses to await death herself, and she weeps.

But God hears the boy's cries. So God comes again to Hagar. Right there in the desert, a well springs up. God sees, God hears, and the stranger and her son live.

In the midst of this story, we meet Abraham's nephew. His name is Lot. We remember his story. Eventually, the famine land couldn't support both him and his uncle. So he set off on his own. He's living now as a stranger, in

a town called Sodom. There in Sodom, God sends two messengers to visit.

Lot invites them to stay at his house. He feeds them, gives them a place to sleep. But the citizens of the town come to the door, demanding for these strangers to be given over to them with violence on their minds. When Lot refuses, the citizens remember he too is a foreigner, a stranger in their midst. And right before they can attack him, the angels pull him back inside to safety.

So the next day, the angels send Lot and his family away, as God destroys Sodom and the neighboring city of Gomorrah. The cities are torched with fire and smoke — because of their violence, because of how their citizens treated the strangers.

Generations come and go. And then we meet the sons of Jacob. It's his youngest son he loves the most. To him he gave that colorful coat. And with this coat and his affinity for talking about his dreams, he attracted the hatred of his brothers.

This is Joseph. We remember his story. His brothers throw him into a pit and then sell him to some travelers. He becomes a stranger, taken as a slave into Egypt. There Joseph was accused of things he hadn't done. It's hard to defend yourself as a stranger. From prison, he is eventually summoned to the pharaoh, who has heard of his knack for interpreting dreams. And suddenly Joseph finds himself as the most powerful man in Egypt, managing the food stores for the pharaoh himself, during a season when famine finally came to Egypt.

But Joseph hasn't forgotten where he came from, so when other strangers from other lands come to him for aid, he gives them the food they need. And when, one day, it was his own brothers who find themselves at his feet, the same ones who sold him all those years ago, Joseph not only helps them, he works with Pharaoh to ensure they have a home in the land of Egypt forever. They would bring their families and live there — not as strangers, but as guests. So the descendants of Abraham migrate to Egypt, a land with enough for everyone, and all live peacefully.

Later, a new pharaoh arises. He doesn't remember his story. He doesn't know where these Hebrews came from. He looks out at his country and hates the strangers.

And so we meet Miriam, and Moses, and Aaron. We remember their story. God sees. God hears. God intervenes.

And an exodus of migrants traveled through the parted seas and into the desert wilderness. That well cared for Hagar, it runs again. And God cared for these new strangers, as they wondered and waited for their new promised land. A new land, a new people, some new rules would be required. God gifts them with rules to bring order to the chaos — rules for their own well-being. Paramount among them: *Don't forget your story.*

You know what it is to be a foreigner; an alien. It was your mother Sarah who was taken by a lie to be used by the king. It was your uncle Lot who saw what happens to cities who meet

strangers with violence. It was your father Joseph who found his power by remembering where he came from, by choosing the compassion he wished he had received.

You know what it is to be a stranger, *so you will take care of the other strangers in your midst*. And you will give special care to the orphans and the widows — for it was your sister Hagar who first named me “the God who sees.” It was your nephew Ishmael who almost died in this desert. So you will care for the most vulnerable, *as I did when you were them too*.

Generations come and go. And we meet a woman named Naomi. We remember her story. She’s from the city of Bethlehem, but during a time of famine, when there was no way to feed her two little boys, she had to go. She traveled with her husband and children to the land of Moab and settled there as strangers. They lived and worked and made a home there. Her sons grew and married Moabite women.

But work is dangerous as a stranger, and one day her husband and both of her sons are killed. With nothing left in Moab, Naomi makes the decision to go back to the land she came from. But one of her daughters-in-law, Ruth, insists on going with her. They go together, but now Ruth is the stranger.

They go back to Bethlehem, in the land of Israel. It’s a land with particular laws regarding strangers. These Israelites were once strangers, too, so during times of harvest, they must leave some of the crops unpicked. They must leave some of the fruit hang-

ing on the trees. The strangers are welcomed into the fields after the laborers, able to collect and keep whatever they find.

So Ruth goes and gleanes the fields, and because of laws built on remembered story, because of rules created around compassion for the vulnerable, her work provides for herself and Naomi. Ruth comes to make a life there and marries a man named Boaz. They have a child named Obed. And he will have a child named Jesse. And Jesse will have a child we know as King David — the fruit of a welcomed stranger.

Generations come and go. Much later, there’s a woman named Mary, and a man named Joseph. We remember their story. Mary and Joseph are not necessarily strangers, but their homeland is occupied by a foreign political force, making them feel as such. So when they have to travel to register for a census, they have to go, even if Mary is too pregnant to make the trip.

They are strangers back in Bethlehem. But years have passed. New rulers occupy. Stories have been forgotten. Now, there is no welcome. There’s no room for them. Young Mary goes into labor. Joseph is desperate. He knocks on door after door. They’re turned away again and again. Finally, an innkeeper offers up space, with the animals. So their first son is born there, outside on the stable floor. While they rest, some visitors come — strangers, from far away. They bring expensive gifts, appropriate for a king, not for an infant.

The Roman king heard of the birth of a new king. He be-

gins to slaughter all the children born within the timeframe of his birth. Joseph, like his namesake so long ago, has a dream. And he knows they have to go. So Mary and Joseph and infant Jesus, they fled across an international border into Egypt. And they live there for years; make a life there; watch their little boy grow there. Years later, a dream tells Joseph the king has died. It’s safe to return home. So they pack the remnants of their lives, grateful for asylum, and make the journey home.

Generations come and go. It was much later, in 1732, that a man named John, with his wife Margaret, boarded a ship with 300 other migrants on the coast of Holland, five young children in tow. I remember their story.

They landed at the port in Philadelphia, where they were instantly strangers. They spoke only German, and in the translating, their last name was recorded as “Huddle,” instead of “Hottle.”

John wrote of his desire to live in a land where Bibles were abundant and liberty was available for everyone. They had grown used to their stranger status. They had fled the Rhine area of Switzerland some years before, lived as Protestant refugees in Holland, while saving money to make the trip to the new world they had heard of.

They worked some land in Virginia until they could acquire their own. They built a church and a schoolhouse. His children never did learn English, but became prolific in their community for their intellect, compassion and their *quiet demeanor*. Their children grew in that schoolhouse, and a generation later, they all

wore black robes — as either judges or pastors.

They slowly migrated farther and farther west. They settled in Indiana and in Illinois and Washington. It was there that a young pilot, fresh out of the First World War, married a young Winnifred Morris. Together they ran a small store. The store's ledger is a mix of signatures for the sale of eggs and lumber, and Winnie's poetry and daydreams. Her letters to and from her brother speak of his adventures moving west, and record her sketches and drawings.

Her children preserved that ledger — and letters that would eventually be found by their great-granddaughter. She had always wondered who “Winnie” was, who had signed the corners of the artwork that hung in her home, artwork she would attempt to mimic when she went to art school herself. And when her call to ministry came, she was handed a collection of old, black robes, much too long for her.

Many years later, there was a young man named Rolland. He was up late with his young, pregnant wife, trying to make the decision of whether or not to become a stranger. I remember their story.

They were born into a hard place. There was a famine of opportunity in the land, and the violence was becoming too much. His wife was hungry, and the thought of his unborn daughter — they had just learned it was a daughter — being hungry, too, he couldn't bear it. So that night they prayed together. His wife put her grandma's rosary around his neck, and the next day he packed a

small bag, and he set out to make the journey to the new world.

He traveled on foot, until he met a man who promised he could help him get across the border. He paid everything he had, everything he saved, which wasn't much. He had already spent most of his savings on the visa forms he had been submitting, with no response, for years.

He traveled through deserts and on buses, relying on the help of other strangers. And finally, miraculously, he made it all the way to Florida, where his sister was waiting. She had kept a candle lit in her window in prayer for his safety and wept when she saw him.

Rolland began work immediately. He liked construction. He was good at it. It kept his mind busy to not think about the wife he missed so severely. He was careful, very careful. He didn't talk to many people. He didn't drive; stayed away from areas of town that seemed dangerous; stayed away from people who seemed loud or reckless. But only a few months later, vans came to his worksite. Some other workers ran, but he didn't. Running would indicate he was doing something wrong. But he wasn't; he was just working.

His sister didn't know why he didn't come home from work that day. He wasn't allowed to make a phone call for 123 days, days during which his daughter was born. Three months later, he still hadn't called his wife. He was desperate to know what his daughter looked like. He swore he could hear her in his dreams — dreams he dreamt on a cot in the

migrant resource center in Agua Prieta, Mexico.

He was so ashamed of ruining their life's plans — so ashamed of being named a criminal, of having to spend time in jail — that he didn't want to tell his wife and child. So instead, he poured out his story to a young American pastor, seeking forgiveness he didn't need to seek. She told him as much, and he promised to call his wife, and she promised she'd remember his story.

Remember who you are. But remembering is hard. And the search for identity would be easier if it really did live in the aisle of colorful hair dyes or stop nagging at us after teenage years — which is why God is so repetitive here. Remember, because it's so easy to forget.

So I remember that I am Hallie Margaret Hottle, named for the woman who boarded a ship with her young children to escape the tyranny of governments who prioritized power over people to escape the violence of a Church who forgot her story.

I'm the descendent of migrants who built churches and courthouses; who made their country better, without ever learning the language, because they loved it, *and it loved them.*

I am the daughter of *black robes*, who insisted on justice from benches and pulpits.

I am the child of artists, who dared to paint a world not like it is, but like they knew it could be.

And I would not be here were it not for the people of Holland and Philadelphia and Virginia, who welcomed my family, who let us make their home ours too.

Remember your story — for we are the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, whom God called to be strangers, whom God corrected and forgave again and again.

We are sisters of Hagar, the one named for her stranger status, the only one to give God a name.

We're the children who wouldn't have survived without the compassion of Joseph, who have been grafted into a tree with Ruth the Moabite and Uriah the Hittite.

We are the strangers, who follow the stranger born into violence, who sought refuge over an international border, who came to teach that God's kingdom is only possible if we remember who we are — if we love the stranger as we, too, have been loved.

Remember who you are.

We are Presbyterians — not the “frozen chosen,” but those born of the faith of protesters who boarded ships and carried their faith to this new world.

We're the children of early Protestants who wrote our nation's Constitution, who organized a government to reject the tyranny we had escaped, who designed checks and balances in church and in state, that all might live in a land of liberty and freedom.

We are the children of those who built the first seminaries, who invested in colleges and hospitals, who got it wrong again and again, who confessed and reformed again and again.

And we are Village Presbyterian Church. We are the descendants of the 232 members who sat in smaller pews and declared they

would invest back into the bigger church, before they were certain this church would live.

We are the carriers of the story of the fight for black liberation, during an era when our city was determined to keep us segregated. We are the students of a founding pastor who dared to preach that all God's children should be treated as God's children, even as some got up and walked away.

We are the creators of shelter for the survivors of hurricane Katrina.

We are the inheritors of rainbow flags that signaled love while our brothers and sisters were brutalized by bad theology.

We are one church, worshiping in two communities because we know the work God has in mind for us is too big to stay right here

Remember who you are — for God has always needed a people who are willing to write a different story. And God has always chosen the strangers — people not so wedded to the way things are that they can't imagine a better way.

People who cannot be still at the sound of weeping in the desert, for they remember their mothers wept there too.

People willing to sacrifice the fruit at the edges of their fields, for they remember how it feels to hunger.

People who know their liberation is bound to the compassion of those who first welcomed them; who know that no one does it alone; who remember, the kingdom will not be found unless everyone comes together.

God has always needed a people who are willing to be part of this story.

And over and over again, God has chosen strangers.

So you can be sure, if the narrative you are hearing in this day pits you against the stranger's story, attempts to tell you that strangers are not people like us, you can be sure it's a narrative God is *not* the author of; you can be sure it's a story not meant for people like us.

For our God is the God of gods, the Lord of lords, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe — who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers.

So remember who you are, for we are strangers too. And God continues to need a people who are willing to live a different story.

Let us pray: Holy God, help us to remember. Help us to live as people who give witness to your story, who choose love and welcome as if your kingdom depends on it. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.