

When God Visits

Luke 8:22-39

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
21 February 2016

Last week Laura Mierau asked me, “Why pineapples?”

Pineapples in architecture and design are symbols of welcome, hospitality, and friendship. Stone pineapples might flank the entryway to a home or garden.

This motif arose in Colonial America when fresh pineapples were rare and a sign of a rich and resourceful hostess. Because of their rarity, they were used to crown tablescapes. One website I read described the scene:

In larger, well-to-do homes, the dining room doors were kept closed to heighten visitors' suspense about the table being readied on the other side. At the appointed moment, and with the maximum amount of pomp and drama, the doors were flung open to reveal the evening's main event. Visitors confronted with pineapple-topped food displays felt particularly honored by a hostess who obviously spared no expense to ensure her guests' dining pleasure

In this manner, the fruit which was the visual keystone of the feast naturally came to symbolize the high spirits of the social events themselves; the image of the pineapple coming to express the sense of welcome, good cheer, human warmth and family affection inherent to such gracious home gatherings.

Thankfully these days we can just grab a pineapple easily at the grocery store. Though I still feel a little fancy whenever I do.

Luke's Gospel is dominated by this theme of Jesus being God's visitation to Earth, visiting for our salvation. Which prompts the question we are considering throughout Lent—“How will we receive our guest?”

But, let's back up and consider another question first today--What happens when God comes to visit? I think the two stories in today's Gospel reading are answers to that question. When God comes to visit God confronts and defeats the destructive forces that threaten our lives.

The storm upon the sea is a symbol for chaos. More than just a story about being on a boat, we can interpret the story on another level. Jesus can calm the chaos that threatens our lives with meaninglessness. Jesus can bring peace to our anxieties, faith in place of our fears, trust to remove our doubts, and hope instead of despair.

The demon-possessed man in the second story is clearly a symbol of the most dehumanized of persons—naked, homeless, mentally battered, without friends or family or the

protection of human society, exiled to the graveyard—a living death. And by the end of this story the man is calm, exhibiting self-control, clothed, and able to return home again.

Those who observe these moments are left astonished, maybe even afraid, at the power exhibited. The point isn't that they are astonished at miracles, for that's commonplace in the Gospel stories, they are astonished at Jesus' sovereignty over fundamental forces and over destructive, dehumanizing powers.

Brendan Byrne writes, "Jesus comes to summon human beings back to the hospitality of the [Heavenly Parent's] home, where alone true humanity can be attained."

You see, when God comes to visit, God becomes the host, offering us a graceful hospitality, offering us salvation, by inviting us home again, into the family of God.

In the church I grew up in the time of greeting and shaking hands ended not with "Blessed be the tie" as it does here but with the chorus "I'm so glad, I'm a part of the family of God," which closed with these lines:

Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod,
For I'm part of the family,
The Family of God.

Pastoring to a predominately gay and lesbian congregation in Oklahoma City I learned that every time I emphasized this aspect of the gospel—that God is bringing us home again to be part of God's family—that many in that congregation would be deeply moved, for so many of them had lost family and friends, so many were unable to go home again.

To be lost is scary. To be in unfamiliar surroundings, unmoored from the people and the places that connect us and help us know who we are.

To be found is deliverance. To be found is joy.

The parallel is not precise, but as I wrote I thought of the look Sebastian gives when I arrive at daycare in the afternoon to pick him up. Even if he's having fun playing and isn't quite ready to leave, there is still that magical look when he hears my voice or sees me across the room and his eyes sparkle and he smiles broadly. Lately he'll wave or start crawling toward me. Dad has arrived. He's going home. But the impact is as profound on me as it is on him. After a day of work, I'm home again, in his shining, happy face.

When God comes to visit, God becomes the host, delivering us from our dangers, toils, and snares, and inviting us into the warmth, the love, the joy, of God's family.

So, back to the question, how do we receive God's hospitality?

Did you notice how the story of the demon-possessed man ends? "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you," Jesus says. This man now becomes a new minister of the hospitality of God. Brendan Byrne writes, "The one who before had no home save the abode of the dead is sent back to his home and told to make it a little beachhead of the hospitality of God. Through his living witness, the people of the city will have a second chance to access God's grace."

Guess what? The same is true of us. It would be a shame if we kept all of God's pineapple for ourselves. God's grace and hospitality are to be shared with others.

And so one answer to that question—how will we respond?—is by inviting others into God’s hospitality. What ways might you do that this Lent? Helping a friend with a serious illness? Visiting a church member in a nursing home? Calling your Mom an extra time every week between now and Easter? Maybe inviting a co-worker to church because right here you experience God’s family and maybe they need that too?

When God comes to visit, the destructive forces in our lives are confronted and we are invited into the warm and loving embrace of God’s family. Let us rejoice in the graceful hospitality of God.