

Proper 17, Year C
Sept. 1, 2019
St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

She seemed to appear out of nowhere.
She spoke just a few words to me,
And then she was gone,
Seeming to vanish as quickly as she'd appeared.

It happened more than 25 years ago,
But I still remember it,
Because that encounter
may have changed at least two lives,
including mine.

I was at the Denver Municipal Animal Shelter,
And I was looking to adopt a dog.
It had been a long time since I'd had a dog.
I'd had dogs as a child,
But ever since I'd left home
My life had really been more conducive to cats.

But my boyfriend had a dog,
And after we broke up,
I found myself missing the dog
More than I missed the man.

So I set out to bring a dog into my life again.
Thing was, I didn't know what kind of dog I wanted.
The dog I'd been missing was a lab.
Growing up, I'd had a German shepherd
And a Chihuahua
And a little black and white dog of undetermined breed.
Then there were those Benji movies to consider.
Was I a *big* dog person or a *little* dog person?
I had no clue.
And this was in the days before the internet
Could offer quick advice.

I figured I'd just go to the animal shelter
And see who was available
And who might be a good match for me.

But I was not prepared for a trip to the animal shelter.
I walked in, and it was overwhelming.
There were so many dogs!
There were way more strays back then than there are today.
And a lot more dogs were put down back then
Than are put down today.
So I knew my choice really could have
Life or death implications.
I began to feel paralyzed with indecision.
I didn't know how to choose.

That's when this woman appeared out of nowhere.
She was just suddenly at my side,
And she said to me,
"You know, you really ought to take a look
at that little red dog at the end of this row.
I think you'd like her."

I thanked her for her suggestion,
And started down the row of cages.
I got to the end of the row,
And turned back to say "This one?"
But the lady was gone.
Never saw her again.

So I looked again at the dog.
She was a frightened little thing,
Quivering in the back of her enclosure.
I don't think I would have paid her much notice
If that lady hadn't specifically sent me to her.
But I stood there looking at her for a minute,
And my heart began to be touched by her plight.
She seemed so forlorn.
I asked the staff if I could meet her.

And that's the story of how I got my Flannery,

My good girl,
 My precious, feisty, scruffy girl
 Who went on to become the first
 Of five terriers I have adopted.
 I now know, I'm a terrier person.

But I think back on that day
 And for 25 years I've wondered,
 "That woman ... who WAS she?
 How did she know to send me to Flannery,
 Out of all those dogs?
 Could she have been ...?
 No, that's just silly.
 But, still, she was just there, and then she was gone.
 I wonder.
 Could she have been an angel,
 Sent by God to guide me at *just that moment?*"

I know that stories like this
 are not everyday occurrences,
 But neither are they uncommon.
 I bet if we took a poll this morning,
 A number of you would have your own stories
 Of encounters
 that left you wondering
 If maybe, just maybe,
 you'd had a brush with the divine.

Now, you know I'm not into New Age-y, woo-woo kinds of things.
 But scripture is filled with stories of angels interacting with humans,
 And our lesson from Hebrews this morning reminds us
 That we should not neglect to show hospitality to strangers
 For by doing that,
 Some have entertained angels unawares.

Here at Saint James, we are all about hospitality.
 We say so right on our website.

We say "We welcome you,
 Even if you haven't been to church in a long, long time,

Can believe we start so early,
 Don't understand why the service takes a full hour,
 And would really rather be home watching the Broncos.”

“We welcome you, even if you're too old to drive after dark,
 too broke to put some money in the offering plate,
 too arthritic to kneel,
 too tone deaf to sing
 or too preoccupied with the cares of the world to really pay attention.”

“We welcome you even if you only came
 because the Red Lobster down the street
 hasn't yet opened for lunch.”

“We welcome Republicans and Democrats,
 high churchers and low churchers,
 those just out of college and those just out of prison,
 Colorado natives
 And all the 2 million or so newcomers
 Who seem to have moved to Denver in the past 12 months.”
 That's what we say.

But we all know that welcoming everyone
 Is easier said than done.
 Making space for all takes work.
 But our scripture readings today make it clear
 That inclusivity is not optional.

The word in the passage from Hebrews
 That we have translated as “hospitality,”
 In the Greek is *philoxenia*,
 Which actually has a deeper meaning
 Than the way most of us “do” hospitality.

When we think of hospitality
 We might think of providing a cup of coffee and a cookie at church,
 Or letting a friend spend a few nights in our guest room,
 Or maybe even giving a few dollars to someone in need.

But if you look at that word, *philoxenia*,
 It comes from two Greek root words:
Philo, meaning brotherly or sisterly love;
 And *xenos*, meaning strange.

You may have heard the term xenophobia,
 Meaning “fear of strangers.”
 That could pretty much describe much of our culture today, couldn't it?
 We seem to be growing increasingly fearful
 Of anyone who is not just like us.

But in contrast to xenophobia
 We have *philoxenia*, meaning “love of strangers.”
 Not tolerating strangers,
 Or politely excluding strangers from our life,
 But loving them.
 And that is the very thing our Lord wants us to do.
 Our Lord insists that we do more
 Than love people who are like us.

The passage from Hebrews goes on:
 “Remember those who are in prison,
 as though you were in prison with them;
 those who are being tortured,
 as though you yourselves were being tortured.”

Perhaps today we might add:
 “Those who are being held in ICE detention cells,
 as though you were being detained with them;
 those being separated from their children,
 as though it were YOUR family being torn apart.”

Well, it's easy to stand up here and say
 “We need to be more welcoming and hospitable to all.”
 But the fact is,
 Our brains are hard-wired to judge.
 Hard-wired to group people
 Into categories we might call
 Friend or foe,
 Us and them.

We have to work hard to stop
Subconsciously dividing the world into teams,
A division that blinds us to the truth
That we are ALL on the same team.
We are ALL children of God.

Imagining that *everyone* we encounter
Is one sent by God
For this very moment
Changes everything.

If we can see the hand of God at work
In everyone we encounter,
Then we know
We have much bigger things to do
Than quibble over politics or religion or money
Or whether we're dog people or cat people,
Or whatever else we find separates us from someone else.
We need to be about the business of bridging those differences,
Not using them as excuses to further insulate ourselves.

And as for those people
who don't seem to appreciate our efforts at being hospitable,
those people who give strangers a bad name...
Well, maybe the one who scares us with tough talk and abusive language
Is one who has been or is being abused himself.
Maybe the one who criticizes everything we do
Didn't get much praise at home growing up.
Maybe the grumpy one next to you
Has chronic pain so severe she can't muster a smile.
Maybe the one who seems lazy or ineffective
Is in a pit of depression you can't see.
Maybe the one who can't seem to make a decision
Is nursing a broken heart,
and longing for love and connection.

And maybe you are the angel
God has sent for them
At just this moment.
Amen.