

In the name of Christ, who welcomes us always. Amen.

It is a delight be here with all of you. My name is Shannon Preston, and I am joining you at Good Shepherd as your Priest for Spiritual formation. I come from Duluth, Minnesota—my childhood home is about one and half miles north of where I-35 ends. In Austin, snow days from school are rare. In Duluth, snow days are rare because it snows so much school is only cancelled when there is about twelve inches of snow at once.

I attended a Benedictine college in central Minnesota, surrounded by forests and farmland - it's affiliated with two large Benedictine monasteries. I went to college expecting to do research in biology and play soccer, and ended up discovering Benedictine spirituality, monastic living, and contemplative prayer—as you do in the typical American college experience.

Eventually, after visiting some monasteries, and a few different jobs and internships, I went to seminary in Northern Virginia. Most recently, as you may have read, I lived the past year in central London with the Community of St Anselm, a new, year-long community developed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Communion - of which the Episcopal Church is a part - for young adults who want to devote a year of their life to God.

Some of members in the community were single, some married. Some worked full-time, some prayed full-time. We came from different professional backgrounds, different Christian denominations, and different parts of the world. Robes were worn at all of our prayer services, and we had two hours of silent prayer every day. We shared all of our meals together, and I ate tuna rice bake just enough times that I don't need to eat it for a very long time. But we also lived and talked about the challenges and gifts of following Christ today—some facing real and

dangerous persecution in parts of Africa, the middle-east, and Asia. Others in cultures that seem past religion and done with what Jesus Christ has to teach us. Most of us saw the world differently than each other—politically, socially, and religiously-- and this community was created largely to learn to live together, pray together, and discover Christ in and through someone we may not otherwise seek out.

The author of Hebrews, the book from which our first lesson comes today, lays out this call to welcome one we might not otherwise seek out - the stranger - recognizing that in welcoming the stranger, we may well entertain angels - messengers of God. I think it is safe to say, and Benedictines make this clear, that in showing hospitality to strangers, we also can encounter Christ himself.

Hebrews offers instruction for Christian living at the time (sometime in the first century, it's not exactly clear when). Hebrews is an unconventional book in the New Testament. It's not a letter like Corinthians, it's not an epistle like Romans. It's more like an extended sermon - forever recorded as 13-chapters long - and is without a known author, and without a known group who received it. What seems agreed upon though is that it is written to a group of people, in some specific context, who are trying to live a Christian life: a life that sets them apart from the dominant culture around them - in this time the ancient Jews are their family and friends. It is the tradition most of them are raised in, but now they seek a life that sets them apart in a way that helps and guides them towards the One and the way they *choose* to follow. The One and the way in which they find truth.

And we hear today this call to show hospitality to the stranger. It moves from mutual love—a kind of familial love—to a hospitality beyond what is familiar, one that welcomes strangers and the unexpected guest. It understands that messengers of God reveal themselves in ways in which we cannot always plan. And welcoming the stranger is not just a gesture of kindness - it is a real way for us to meet God.

Now, I imagine many of us are creatures of routine. We find comfort, even joy, in what we do again, and again, and again—the schedule by which we live, the parts of our day and areas of life we can count on - that we can fall back on, that are rocks in our life. The Community of St. Anselm followed routine, and we discovered rather quickly the virtue of silence when one spends nearly every waking moment with others. It took about one day for breakfast in silence, seated around the table with others, to go from being somewhat uncomfortable to becoming a precious gift. For many, a cup of coffee in the morning is non-negotiable. For you, it may be walking the dog, landing back at home with loved ones at the end of day... In many ways, what we do here on Sundays is a routine, following more or less the same pattern each week.

Routine is important - the familiar grounds us. And God meets us in the routine. A traditional, monastic teaching is that doing the dishes or sweeping the floor can be a powerful method of prayer. Suddenly the mundane - the ordinary - becomes holy. And it makes sense for us to find God's love in what we know. Thank God for those parts of our life, whatever they may be, that are familiar and dependable.

The passage from Hebrews starts today, saying let mutual love continue—this kind of love of welcoming family and friends who we know we enjoy to share ourselves with. This we choose to continue.

But it is from here, from our routine, that God comes to us in ways we cannot expect. God is God and is not limited to how we think God should come into our lives. God may not always fit into our agenda or schedules. This is not intended to cause stress. God knows what we need and can show up in our lives in ways we cannot predict, in ways we do not control—but in ways, that if we see them, if we *really* let them in, can bless us and fill us.

As much as prayer and so much of the spiritual life is a resource of comfort and connection with others, it also intends to open us to the unexpected: not only the literal stranger, the one who is different or foreign to us and who we do not know, but also, the unexpected moment of encounter in the midst of our everyday routine. When what seems like disruption becomes Holy, God enters our life in fresh and unexpected ways—beyond the limited space we may otherwise designate for Him.

God wants to be in our lives. And God comes into our lives through the routine, the comfortable. And can come to us in the unexpected, the disruption, the stranger. *Let mutual love continue.* “And do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for in doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”