

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Roland P. Perdue, Interim Pastor  
Sunday, March 4, 2012

## WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN?

Genesis 18:1-15  
Hebrews 13:1-2, 13-16

(A brief organ introduction to the William Tell Overture).

Do recall those early evenings sitting about the radio? (Music builds again and then recedes into the background).

“A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty hi-ho-Silver: The Lone Ranger! (A short piece of the *Overture* here). With his faithful Indian companion Tonto, the daring and resourceful masked rider of the plains led the fight for law and order in the early west. Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear. The Lone Ranger rides again.”

After the *Tootsie Roll* commercial, the adventure began to unfold. The Lone Ranger and Tonto save a charming schoolmarm from a fate worse than death, protect a town from rustlers, catch the stagecoach robbers, and as the Lone Ranger rides off into the sunset, someone would ask, "Who was that Masked Man?" while gazing at a Silver Bullet.

(The *Overture* builds again).

And, as if in answer, we would hear, “Hi-ho Silver, away!” And the announcer said,

“Be with the Long Ranger and Tonto same time next week for new dangers in another thrill-packed adventure. The Lone Ranger rides again!”

### “Who was that Masked Man?”

It depends, doesn't it? Friend or foe, you may never really know. If he is helping you, the Stranger is the hope of your future, somewhat like the Cavalry coming to your rescue at the end of the fierce battle. Like maybe the election of a new president. But if hurting you, he is someone altogether different: the judge and jury, an avenging angel. Like maybe the election of a president. "Who was that Masked Man?" It depends.

We heard another venerable old story in the first reading this morning. I love the way one of the authors or editors of the Book of the Beginnings, Genesis, lets us in, clues us in on what is taking place while keeping Abraham and Sarah in the dark. “The Lord God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.” Immediately we realize Abraham is having a visitation from God, an epiphany, theophany.

But Abraham does not know that. The next line in the drama reads, "He looked up and saw three men standing near him. He has no idea that they somehow represent, are indeed stand-ins for God! Would you? Would I? "Who was that Masked Man?" Who are these strangers casting a shadow near his tent?

Abraham, a tent traveling nomad, knows about desert hospitality. His acts of hospitality

and kindness to these strangers have been preserved in the language of religious people. He says, "Pass me not." It is a request we shall hear again when this Season of Lent has turned into Eastertide and the Emmaus Road travelers in Luke's gospel fail to recognize the Resurrected Jesus. "Abide with us awhile! It is toward evening. Abide with us and share a simple meal with us." There is a pattern in the Divine Drama. That which happened will happen again and again as God comes to us in many a guise. There is a childhood hymn I remember. "Pass me not. Oh Gentle Savior; hear my humble cry. While on others thou art calling, do not pass me by." Abraham says. "Abide with me." Share my table! Break bread with me. Bathe your tired bodies and refresh yourselves.

### **Who was that Masked Man, these Strangers? Sarah does not know either.**

But she wonders, who is that man, or those men, Abraham is talking with? Suddenly Abraham burst into the tent and told Sarah to make some pita bread while he ran and asked a servant to kill a young calf and prepare a meal for the guests. That takes more than a few minutes, and she can't help but wonder what they are talking about all this time.

Now that they are eating, she can listen to their conversations. She is shocked by what she hears and she cannot believe her ears. The Stranger asks, "Where is your wife Sarah?" Her husband replies, "She's in the tent." Then the Stranger said. "I will come back to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son."

Why would a stranger bring this humiliating subject up again except to taunt her in her tired, old age? That stillborn hope haunted her; it was inconceivable. And she laughed right out loud. Oh, I don't think it was a happy laugh of joy and anticipation. Rather, it was the cold, cynical laugh of a dream too long delayed, of a hope hopelessly unfulfilled. It would not have surprised me if she tossed the makings of the bread right out of the cooking tent. The nerve of these strangers making such fun of her.

The Stranger heard her loud and clear. And watch the way the storyteller shifts the focus from any confusion about who the strangers may be. He wants to make certain we don't miss the identity of the Masked Man. The storyteller now brings Sarah and Abraham in the knowledge that they have bumped right into God. The drama reads:

But the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Am I really to have a child now that I am old?'" Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?

Sarah is caught like a deer in headlights, and she lies, "I did not laugh." But Yahweh replied. "Oh yes, you did."

### **Who was that Masked Man?**

Did they finish their meal with Abraham and Sarah? Would not that have been a wonderful conversation to overhear? Or did they ride off into the sunset, "Hi-ho-Silver! Away!"

I don't know. But nine months later, Sarah was rocking a cradle and whispering sweet little coos to her baby son. And they who laughed named their son "Laughter." And every time she held her son close she laughed and wondered if anything was too hard, impossible or wonderful for God. By the way, the author of Luke's Gospel in the New Testament picks up on this same tag-line. When the messenger Gabriel tells the maiden Mary she is going to have a baby boy, she says it cannot happen because she has never slept with a man. And the messenger replies. "Is anything too wonderful, too impossible, for God?"

I love this simple and direct approach to God's visit. I love it because this is the way most of us experience a visit, a nudge, prod or bump from God and our Lord Christ's Spirit. A random and apparent interruption turns out to be Jesus moving close to us. For instance, sad is the student, the teacher or parent who cannot feel Christ's Spirit shouting at all of us in the high school shooting in Ohio. Bullying is dangerous to both the bullied and the bullying. All of us are being prodded again and again these days to get involved in strengthening our gentler personality and humane behavior.

"Who was that Masked Man?" The strangers in our midst, the strangers we meet along the way, and the visitors we welcome are always more than they seem to be. Always more. "The Lord God appeared to Abraham one day... Abraham looked up and saw three strangers standing near him." In John's gospel, Jesus says, "I was among you as one unknown." We just never really know, do we? This Jesus let loose in the resurrection can show up anywhere and in any guise. God, three strangers standing near, a woman trying to sleep on a bench, families spending the night at the Inn, people getting food at the food bank, those murdered in Syria, children bullied and bullying – are they all somehow linked to one another, to you and me, joined in God's Spirit and related? Are they random interruptions - or angelic visitations?

For the person praying for a loved one who is chemically addicted, his or her hitting bottom may be a sign of hope. For the person out of work, the employment advisory may be a sign of support. For the one suffering great physical pain, the introduction of a new medication is a sign of life. For the one whose family is splitting apart the call of an old friend, for the lonely and isolated the visit of a Stephen Minister, for the child lost in the confusing world of adults someone calling him by name may all indeed be a Masked Angel!

It is a wonderful old story, this story of the Eternal Masked Man, or Men, or Women and Children who slip and slide into our lives in unexpected ways, in many different guises and countless interruptions. And I believe the story true to our existential experiences with God. This is indeed the primary manner in which God arrives in our midst. Someone, a stranger, a friend, another brings us face to face with the Other.

And any time people take the time and expend the energy to reach across the wall, through the barrier, God is a Masked Stranger in their midst. When Iranian and American diplomats sit and discuss, God is at that table. And when Jew and Arab debate rather than die fighting each other, God is there.

How often has it happened to you and me that a Stranger changed our lives and became the bearer of hope? Or someone you have never paid much attention to suddenly turn out to be more than you ever knew?

### **“Who was that Masked Man?”**

Is anything too hard, impossible, and too wonderful for the Lord? Are we willing to open our arms to Strangers and serve them, as though they were Angels - or Christ? I think the only way we have toward God is through someone else. The Ancient Preacher in the Book of Hebrews tells us:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Who was that Masked Man? You never really know, do you?

(The *Overture* is briefly played again).