

Every Advent I am reminded of a funny story that happened to me five years ago. I was on my way to work at the church and I stopped by the drive thru at Starbucks. I really needed some coffee and there was only one car in front of me, so I thought it was my lucky day. But it seemed like this one car was taking forever and I needed to get to work!

I found myself getting frustrated as I tried to figure out what was going on in the car in front of me. Was she doing a big pick up for her office? Was she putting in an order for a friend? Did she lose her wallet in her car? I watched as she leaned over the passenger seat seeming to look for every piece of change in her car. Finally, she paid and went on her way. As I drove to the pickup window the friendly cashier said: “Your coffee has been paid for by the woman in front of you.”

Boy was I embarrassed. That day I was reminded of the power of the kindness by this stranger. This one action changed my whole day and caused me to be more mindful of how I perceive others. Every Advent I think of this encounter and remember how I experience God’s love embodied for me.

I hope this Advent you have experienced some of this kindness, some of Christ’s love embodied. Perhaps someone has opened a door for you or made your life a little easier.

As we continue the second Sunday of Advent, we celebrate that Christ is love and Christ calls us to love others. In the Bible there are many passages about the way God calls us to love. One of the most familiar passages is from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

This is the way God calls us to love our family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers. Especially in this season we are taught to fear the stranger. They may have COVID, so we must stay away. And yet, in the Bible we see that God used people that seemed like strangers, to prepare the way for Jesus Christ.

If ever there was a stranger in the Bible, it would have to be John the Baptist. While he did not have a COVID cough, his peers were deterred by his strange fashion sense and diet.

We hear about John’s appearance described in Mark 1: “he was arrayed in a ‘camel’s hair’ garment, secured by a leather belt, and his diet was locusts and wild honey” (Mark 1:6). Commentary tells us his appearance may have been “reminiscent of the adornment of certain Old Testament prophets, particularly Elijah.”¹

We see John is the final prophet to speak before Jesus’ arrival. Here we see John using Isaiah’s words: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (Mark 1:4). You see the people of God had been waiting for the Promised Messiah, and here John was telling them this is happening NOW! John told them this is not just another prophet like me who can perform baptisms. This is someone who can baptize with the power of the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8).

I often think about John. How it may have been difficult for him to come out of the wilderness and his lifestyle of solitude to share this important news. John did this because Jesus was not a stranger to him.

Jesus was his cousin, and they had a special bond. When Mary visited Elizabeth when they were both pregnant, Elizabeth’s baby leapt in her womb and she was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:40). John was a very important person that helped us prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

Through our Bible study “Making Room” by Ed Robb we, too, have been called to think about how we can make room for Christ in our lives once again this season of Advent.

In his book, Robb reminds us that immediately Mary and Joseph had to make room for strangers. They were visited by shepherds and kings. Everyone wanted to lay their eyes on the Christ-child. At a time where they were exhausted and far from home, they welcomed all those who came to see their son. Robb said: “...This young couple provides us with a lesson in gracious hospitality.”²

In the book of Hebrews the Apostle Paul echoes this same sentiment when he says: “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:1-2). This same hospitality to strangers started in the Old Testament.

In Genesis 18 Abraham showed hospitality to the three strangers that showed up at his tent. They broke bread together and the strangers told Sarah that she would indeed have a son, even in her old age.

All throughout the Bible we see God call prophets to speak to the people to whom they were strangers. And the amazing thing is the prophets followed God’s command because God led them through it. We also need God as we welcome strangers in our lives.

Last week I challenged the congregation to set a place at the table for Jesus. In doing so we are all reminded to continue to make room for Christ in our lives. Today the question before us is who is the stranger who needs to be welcomed this Advent?

Is it a difficult family member, or isolated friend, is it the same person you pass on the road each day? Who is God calling you to make room for in your life?

Evangelism to strangers is important because it can save lives. You may have heard a story like this. That someone was having a particularly difficult day, and someone took the time to smile at them and it turned their whole day around. In Acts 16 we hear that Paul and Silas had an experience like this.

They were imprisoned and there was a great earthquake. Their shackles fell off. This was their chance. If there ever was a time to escape this was the moment. Instead of thinking of themselves, they extended love to the Philippian jailer. They convinced the rest of the prisoners to stay so that the jailer would not take his own life.

Before this moment, the jailor was going to kill himself because he knew no one would believe that there was an earthquake, and they would kill him for losing all his prisoners. Instead of a night of darkness that would have turned into years of darkness for his family, the jailer saw the light of Christ in the love extended to him by Paul and Silas. He invited them to dinner at his house and his whole household was baptized and found faith in Jesus Christ.

This is what happens when we extend love to strangers. It can literally save lives both physically and spiritually.

You never know what people are going through. Even people who seem to have it all together may be falling apart inside. Especially during this season of the pandemic many people are having a really hard time. Depression, anxiety, and addiction are on the rise.

We don’t know what kind of battles others are fighting so we are always called to extend the love of Christ to strangers.

This Advent we are called to make room to love the stranger. I wonder which stranger God is calling you to make room for.

As we prepare once again to receive Jesus Christ, the prophet Isaiah calls us to extend love to the stranger by providing comfort. Comfort can come in many forms. It can be a listening ear, some warm clothes, thoughtfulness, and hospitality.

Jesus extended love and comfort to so many because as Ed Robb says, “...no one was a stranger to Jesus.”³ Especially through moments of healing, Jesus brought comfort to those who had been suffering for so long with pain they thought would never end.

In Luke 13, Jesus encounters a stranger. While he was preaching in the synagogue, he witnesses a woman who had been in pain for 18 years. In fact, her pain was so severe that her spine has caused her to be bent over and now she could not straighten up her back. Her new way of life was living bent over.

What is beautiful about this passage of Scripture is we do not see the woman ask for healing, but Jesus immediately goes to her, places his hand on her and offers her healing. And immediately she is healed. She can stand up again. Her whole perspective on life changes in that moment and she experiences a moment of comfort after what had been a life of pain.

The good news for our lives today is that we can take part in preparing the way for Christ by embodying Christ’s love to others.

As the body of Christ, we are called to bring one another comfort by sharing our gifts with one another. One way we are sharing our resources during Advent is by making 166 Christmas bags for the children of Rappahannock County.

We also adopted some angels and some seniors at Willis Chapel UMC. In doing these actions, we hope others will experience God and accept Jesus into their hearts.

So, this season of Advent I invite you to make room for the stranger and in so doing you may just save a life. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary.” Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1995.

² Ed Robb. “Making Room.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2020. P. 27.

³ Ibid. P. 29.