

# INTRODUCTION: WELCOMING THE STRANGER GOD

God, the Bible tells us, comes to us in strangers. And as Jim Morrison of the Doors sang, people are strange. Strangers, I guess, are especially so—which makes it hard for us to welcome the stranger God.

If I may start with a strange story, let me tell you why the man in the cell next to Mr. Albert was drinking out of his toilet.

I tend to call Al “Mr. Albert,” because he is older than I am and I’m a sucker for Southern manners. I’ll add Mr. or Miss to your name if you’re my senior. Mr. Albert has been in prison for a few decades, and he’s been a longtime member of the Bible class I teach each week at the maximum-security French Robertson Unit just north of my hometown in Abilene, Texas. I’ve been going out to the prison for over five years now, every Monday night.

Back when I was doing the chaplaincy training

to get clearance to lead the Bible study, the head chaplain asked me why I wanted to come out to the prison.

“Matthew 25,” I answered, “Jesus said we’d find him disguised as a prisoner. So I’m out here looking for Jesus.”

This is a book about Matthew 25—about how Jesus comes to us in disguise, in foreigners and refugees, in the homeless and the outcasts, in the prisoner and the hungry. This is a book about the strangeness of a God who comes to us in strangers. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, Jesus is disguised as the prisoner and the sick. In your life, Jesus might be disguised as the coworker at the watercooler or the Muslim woman standing next to you in the grocery store.

This is a book about the ancient Christian practice of hospitality, about encountering the God who surprises us in strangers. Do not forget to practice hospitality, the book of Hebrews entreats us, for some of us have entertained angels unawares.

True, the Men in White in the prison (inmates in Texas wear all white) and Mr. Albert are unlikely angels: I’d never imagined angels could have that many tattoos. But over and over again, Jesus has kept his promise and come to me in the Men in White.

Which brings me back to Mr. Albert’s story.

## STRANGER GOD

Al had been put into Ad Seg, which stands for Administrative Segregation—it's the jail within the prison, solitary, the hole. A prisoner is in a cell all by himself and cannot leave it for twenty-three hours of the day. Most of the men in Ad Seg are there because they are extraordinarily violent, but you're also sent to Ad Seg as punishment.

Mr. Albert sat alone in Ad Seg in a cell that had dried feces smeared on the walls. But what really was gnawing at him wasn't disgust or loneliness; it was the injustice that had befallen him. Al had been accused by the guards of something he didn't do, landing him in Ad Seg. So while Al sat in that disgusting cell, his hatred for the guards boiled and seethed.

As the days passed in Ad Seg, Al got to talking with the inmate in the cell next to his. The sink wasn't working in the man's cell, so when he grew thirsty, he had to drink the water out of the cell's toilet. Many times, the man had asked for his sink to be repaired, but the guards didn't listen. So the man kept drinking out of the toilet.

Feeling sympathy for his fellow prisoner, Al would take a scrap of plastic and fill it with water from his sink. He'd then tie it off, making a small, improvised water balloon. Al would slide the balloon down the hallway toward the door of the man's

cell. The man would reach out and grab the water balloons. Thanks to Al, he could drink the water from these water balloons rather than from the toilet.

Al eventually got out of Ad Seg, but his anger and hate for the guards lingered. A spiritual poison was seeping through his heart and soul.

And then things got worse.

Al received a call from his daughter. She was engaged, she announced, and the couple had set a date. While Al and his daughter rejoiced together, they also cried because Al couldn't be there to walk her down the aisle and give her away on her wedding day.

All this sent Al into a deeper spiritual pit. The injustice of his time in Ad Seg, the inability to walk his daughter down the aisle—it was all too much.

On the day of the wedding, a guard approached Al. “Come with me,” the guard said. Al got up and followed.

The guard led Al to an office with a phone. “You can pick it up,” the guard said.

Al picked up the line and said hello.

The voice of his daughter answered.

The timing of the call had been arranged by the guards. Al's daughter was standing at the back of the church, and the wedding march was about to play.

## STRANGER GOD

The call had been organized so that Al could speak to his daughter right before she walked down the aisle.

Al had tears in his eyes at the Bible study one Monday night, when he shared this story of his journey through darkness into this unexpected moment of grace.

“Satan will tell you lies,” Al said, “Lies that these guards are evil and that nothing good is in them. I believed those lies for a very long time. But I’m here to tell you that there is good in everyone. The phone call with my daughter showed me that.”

Over and over again, Jesus comes to us in disguise. Jesus comes to the man in Ad Seg as his neighbor slides him water balloons. Jesus comes to Mr. Albert in the guards who arrange the phone call with his daughter on her wedding day. Jesus comes to me everywhere in the testimony Al shared that night in our Bible study, in Al’s humanity to the man in Ad Seg, in the surprising act of kindness from the guards, in Al’s tear-filled testimony of confession, repentance, and forgiveness. I came to the prison looking for Jesus, and I found him.

Yet, over and over, we miss seeing Jesus. The very people Jesus names in Matthew 25—the prisoner, the homeless, the hungry—are named precisely because we *don’t* see them. The parable of the Sheep and

the Goats in Matthew 25 is a cautionary tale. In the parable, all of humanity stands before the judgment seat of God. God sends some to the left, the goats, and some to the right, the sheep. After the sorting, God says to the goats, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.” Alarmed and confused, the goats exclaim, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?” Jesus’s response, in a nutshell: “Everywhere. You saw me everywhere. I was standing right in front of you.”

We know that God comes to us in strangers. We know there are angels out there. We know Jesus shows up in the very people we are overlooking or ignoring. Yet we end up acting like the goats in Matthew 25.

There’s a simple answer for why we do this: Strangers are strange. *And that makes God strange.*

The etymological roots of the word *strange* go back to an Old French word *estrange*, meaning foreign, alien, unusual, and unfamiliar. Strangers are

## STRANGER GOD

foreign to us, weird and unfamiliar, making us hesitant and even suspicious. Strangers take us out of our relational comfort zone. Consequently, the God who comes to us in strangers makes us feel anxious and awkward.

We know that the people of God are called to be a people of hospitality. Leviticus 19:34 commands, “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.” Paul tells the church in Romans 12:13 to “practice hospitality.” But the strangeness of strangers makes hospitality hard. As we’ve watched cable news and our social-media feeds, we’ve all witnessed our failures in extending hospitality to strangers, our unwillingness to welcome people into our nation, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, churches, homes, and hearts. The refugee family stopped at our borders. The homeless person sleeping on our streets. The racial segregation that continues to plague our cities, schools and churches. The signs saying, “God Hates Fags.” The nastiness of our political debates. And far too often, Christians have been the worst offenders, the very first to greet strangers with Keep Out signs. The God who comes to us in strangers is too strange for us to see. Like the goats in Matthew 25, we refuse to welcome Jesus in disguise.

As a psychologist, I'm frequently invited to work with groups and organizations who are passionate about welcoming strangers into their community. Many of us are working hard to extend a welcome across the social divides that separate us in the world, the big divides that dominate our news and social-media feeds—the racial, economic, and political divides and a host of other divides as well—all the big and little things that cause us to avoid and exclude each other. As I've visited and worked with these groups, I've found that while we often start with good intentions, initiatives, and mission statements, our plans struggle to get off the ground. To be sure, there are always a few passionate and devoted people who throw themselves into this work, but the work of welcoming strangers rarely becomes infectious and contagious. Good-hearted people, even committed followers of Jesus, continue to hold back. We know we're called to hospitality, but something keeps breaking down.

We fail at hospitality because hospitality doesn't begin with a program, with a new “welcoming” or “neighboring” initiative. Hospitality has to begin in the heart. The same goes for matters of law and policy. When we fear strangers, we erect walls and obstacles to keep them out. On social media and cable news, we fixate on the physical, legal, and eco-



## STRANGER GOD

conomic walls that shut strangers out. But we routinely fail to notice that these external walls originate with *a failure of the heart*, with a wall erected within our souls.

This fear of strangers is called xenophobia, a word that combines the Greek word for stranger—*xenos*—with *phobia*, the word for fear. As the Doors sang, people are strange, and strangeness creates in us discomfort, anxiety, fear, and uneasiness around strangers.

By contrast, the biblical word for hospitality is *philoxenia*. *Philia*, you probably know from the city Philadelphia, is the Greek word for brotherly love. Hospitality begins in the heart. Instead of *phobia*, Christians are called to extend *philia* to strangers. So the central argument of this book is that hospitality—welcoming God in strangers and seeing Jesus in disguise—begins by widening the circle of our affections, the circumference of our care, the arena of our compassion, and the territory of our kindness.

But hearts aren't easily changed. You can't change hearts with pep talks, protests, podcasts, Facebook rants, tweets, or a really good sermon. Hearts require spiritual formation through habits and practices that directly address the social and psychological dynamics at work that keep us from seeing and welcoming each other. Some of these

dynamics are social in nature, involving the way one demographic group feels about another demographic group: black versus white, rich versus poor, male versus female, straight versus gay, Democrat versus Republican, American versus people from any other country, citizen versus immigrant, Christian versus Muslim, and on and on. But many of the dynamics that separate us are personal and emotional in nature, reflecting how individuals are uniquely wired to push some people away and welcome others. The way we're wired—what we find scary, unpleasant, difficult, or strange in others—affects how welcoming we are and how hard or easy it is for us to see Jesus in a prisoner or in a homeless person, a political opponent, a refugee, or a coworker.

What gets ignored in the call for hospitality are these personal and emotional responses we have toward others. The God who comes to us in strangers is strange. And that strangeness trips us up, emotionally and interpersonally. Our discomfort causes us to hesitate and hold back. *Philia* gets trumped by *phobia*. We find ourselves leaning away from people rather than leaning in.

So hospitality demands more than good will and good intentions. Emotions, including social emotions, are not easily changed. You can't fix

## STRANGER GOD

depression by telling someone, “Cheer up!” You can’t get someone to become less angry just by admonishing, “Calm down” or less anxious by saying, “Don’t worry, be happy!” Emotions can’t be turned on or off like a light switch. The same goes for our feelings about people. Hospitality is an emotional battleground. If someone is scared about going into a prison, telling her, “Don’t be scared” isn’t helpful. The same goes for any other social group you find scary or suspicious. If you find some people irritating, annoying, or revolting, a demand that you should feel differently isn’t practical. Yet these are the very feelings that cause us to miss seeing the God who comes to us in strangers.

These social feelings were at work in every part of Mr. Albert’s testimony that night at the prison. Feelings of distrust and suspicion isolate the inmates from each other. Kindness is often interpreted as weakness, a vulnerability to be exploited. So Al sharing water with his neighbor was an unexpected act of grace, Jesus coming to an Ad Seg inmate in a stranger. Those same feelings of distrust and suspicion separate the guards and the inmates. A tense and often hateful relationship exists between the officers and the Men in White. Yet God surprises Al by coming to him in the guise of a guard, in the gift of the wedding-day phone call. And as scary as

prisons and tattooed inmates might be, Jesus comes to me in Mr. Albert and the Men in White.

There are two big missing pieces in our efforts to welcome the stranger God. The first missing piece is that hospitality, before it can be anything else, begins as the emotional battle to widen the circle of our affections. Theologian Miroslav Volf calls this “the will to embrace.”<sup>1</sup> But cultivating the will to embrace is hard, emotional work. The emotional barriers that separate us are formidable and difficult to overcome. That brings us to the second missing piece: that hospitality begins as a spiritual discipline, as a habit-forming practice aimed at expanding the bandwidth of our kindness and compassion. Our emotions change when we begin to adopt practices that slowly, over time, reconfigure our feelings and affections. A spiritual discipline that can do this for us is known as the Little Way of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.

I’ve come to think of Thérèse’s Little Way as the lost spiritual discipline. When we think of “spiritual disciplines,” we think of practices like prayer, silence, solitude, Bible reading, Sabbath, and fasting. When we think of spiritual disciplines, we think of contemplative retreats in monastic settings. These

1. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

## STRANGER GOD

spiritual disciplines focus us on our relationship with God. Through spiritual disciplines, we seek a deeper intimacy with God, a greater awareness of God. We seek an encounter with the sacred and divine.

While these spiritual disciplines move us toward God, they routinely fail to move us toward each other. This is the genius of the Little Way, the lost spiritual discipline, a habit-forming practice that moves us toward each other so that our affections for each other expand and widen. The Little Way is a spiritual discipline of hospitality and welcome. This is exactly the practice we need if we want to overcome the strangeness of strangers, a habit-forming discipline that enables us to encounter the God who comes to us in disguise. The Little Way trains us to entertain angels unawares, God coming to us in coworkers, neighbors, refugees, the homeless, and the people in the line with us at the grocery store.

Even in cellmates, prison guards, and prisoners.

Matthew 25, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, doesn't have to be a cautionary tale for us. It doesn't matter what the Doors sing about people; we can learn to see Jesus in everyone.

That's the call to hospitality in a nutshell: welcoming the stranger God.

