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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Texts: Hebrews 13: 1-6; Revelation 3: 14-22  
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“Behold, I Stand at the Door and Knock”

If you had occasion to visit Lyme Street on Tuesday night, you would have seen hundreds of people on either side of the street decked out in all manner of costumes, ringing doorbells and asking for tricks, or more likely, treats. It's the one night of the year that Old Lyme comes alive after dark, and I enjoy the sense of festivity and play that comes with the evening. I love the creativity that goes into some of the costumes, and I especially like thinking about the tradition of dressing up, and becoming a different character for a time. It's something that many of us got to do in school plays when we were kids or adolescents, trying on new identities for a short period, and then playing with the emotions associated with those identities in a way that allowed us to experience something outside of our ordinary experience, without being capsized by it. That's why I enjoy thinking about the masks that kids put on when Halloween comes around every year. There were the ghouls and zombies and superheroes and children's book characters, all of them trying on a different identity, knocking on the door, holding out buckets already loaded with candy, hoping to add a little more to the load.

As I was walking up Lyme Street on Tuesday, trying to catch up with my kids, I caught myself thinking that perhaps this practice of masking was theological in its orientation. There are certainly powerful examples throughout the world of human beings donning masks in order to incarnate a god or a spirit. I take it that Halloween is a vestigial trace of those practices. But it's the reverse dynamic that caught my imagination on Tuesday. I began to wonder if perhaps it's God who most often wears a mask. Halloween and the Scriptures alike encourage us to treat appearances delicately. Beneath the ghoulish mask, after all, you might find your neighbor, or your neighbor's kid. And beneath the appearance of an ordinary person, the Scriptures teach us, you might discover a god, or an angel, or perhaps Jesus himself.

The New Testament is filled with stories about the concealed appearances of the divine. In fact, once you begin reading the New Testament through this prism of masks, of concealment, you find examples everywhere. Everywhere. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus himself is a concealed appearance of the divine, and very few are able to recognize him. But our Scripture lessons for the morning dramatize these moments of masks and misrecognitions in powerful ways.

We'll start with Hebrews. That book counsels its readers never to cease the practice of hospitality, for in welcoming the stranger, one often entertains angels unaware. We're all familiar with the iconography of angels, the winged beings who announce this or that in various biblical tales. But the real definition of an angel is looser in the Bible, and more mysterious by far. An angel is simply a messenger of God, though in the tales we read, those messengers are usually personified and given regal sounding names. Still, I think we can understand an angel as that which conveys a message of the divine to us, that which causes us to pause and wonder at something, that which reminds us of our vocation as carriers of the gospel of peace into the world. In that sense, each of

us possesses the capacity to become as angels, not in the sense of phantasmatic beings, but in the New Testament sense of becoming a window into the divine, of providing a glimpse of God, albeit a God disguised or masked. *You* are a mask of God. I want you to hear that this morning. Each of you is a window into the divine when you practice acts of compassion and hospitality, when you exhibit moments of generosity or understanding. Each of you possess the capacity to be an angel, which is simply a fancy way of saying a messenger of God. So too, when you open yourself to another, receiving them with care, you entertain angels, masks of the divine, who may bear important messages that you need to receive.

But it's our second lesson that I find most striking of all. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," are the words Jesus speaks to the church at Laodicea. "If you hear my voice and open the door to me, I will come in to eat with you, and you with me," he tells the church. What's interesting about that passage is the scene of misrecognition that it conveys. Jesus stands *outside* the church, not inside, asking to come in. It's not that Jesus is inside, trying to get out to the rest of the world. Rather, it seems for this church, he's never been there. Which begs the question: just what has been there all along? Presumably, this early church possessed all the appurtenances of Christian worship. Presumably there were songs that were sung, prayers that were prayed, meals that were shared, Scriptures that were read. Presumably Jesus had been proclaimed within the walls of that church, but the text hints that the church at Laodicea had mistaken all of that for the presence of Jesus himself. But he had never been there. Jesus is still trying to get in, but somehow the church can't hear him or see him or notice him, because the appearances have deceived them. "Behold I stand at the door and knock," Jesus says. Unfortunately, we don't know if the church at Laodicea heard the knocks. We don't know if they received that visitor. But in a way it doesn't matter. It's our response that the text elicits, not that of the church in Laodicea. Perhaps it's the door of every church that Jesus is knocking upon. Perhaps the door is ours.

This past week I started reading a book that I recommend to all of you, a book that is, ultimately, about the masks of God. It's about the Central Methodist Church in downtown Johannesburg, South Africa, and about Paul Verryn's leadership there. Paul is a long time friend of this congregation, known to many of you through his frequent visits here, or through your visits to South Africa. If you haven't met Paul, you've likely seen his portrait in the hallway leading toward the fellowship hall. We keep it there because Paul has served as an angel to our congregation, a messenger reminding us of who and what we're called to be. But let me tell you about the book. It's entitled *Sanctuary: How an Inner City Church Spilled Onto a Sidewalk*, and it describes how, through Paul's leadership, Central Methodist became a refuge to the homeless and the displaced living in Johannesburg.

Here's the story: as the situation in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe deteriorated, a flood of refugees fled across the border looking for safety. And because of Central's long history, and because of Paul's reputation for exercising hospitality, many of them knocked at the door of the church, so to speak. Paul turned none of them away. The numbers swelled from a handful, to a few hundred, to a thousand, and, at the height of a xenophobic scare that swept through South Africa, more than three thousand. You can see pictures and videos of this if you search for it. People slept everywhere – in pews, under pews, in cabinets, in hallways, on narrow steps, arrayed one by one on each level.

Meanwhile, the church began offering classes for all of these refugees – dance and karate classes, language classes and job training. It provided a makeshift health clinic. Food trucks were set up on the streets outside to provide food, while a whole system of organization was established to maintain a semblance of order.

You can imagine how that sat with many of the neighbors. You can imagine how that sat with many of the long time parishioners of the church. You can imagine, as well, how it sat with some of the political authorities in Johannesburg. Even in the face of severe backlash, Paul refused to stand down. He refused to cast these individuals into the streets, because each of them was, for him, an instance of Jesus drawing near. “There is no doubt that the way in which we treat the stranger reflects our humanity,” Paul told a reporter at the time. “Whether that stranger be from another country or whether those strangers be strange because they are poor is beside the point. If we are going to survive as a human race, we are going to have to reassess our fundamental value system.”<sup>1</sup>

At our last Deacon’s meeting, we agreed to read this chronicle of Paul Verryn’s efforts to answer the call of Jesus in Johannesburg. We did so because we thought it might provide insight into some of the questions our church is currently facing. Last year’s political campaign brought with it a wave of xenophobic resentment, which after the election was converted into policies that have scared the living daylights out of immigrants residing in the US without documentation. Deportations are up 43% in 2017 vs. 2016. Now, I know a common rejoinder is that these are people who have come to the United States illegally, and that this crackdown is simply an enforcing of preexisting laws. Maybe. But many of the targets have been here for decades. Many have families, and children. Many came in order to join other family members who were already here. Many were fleeing political instability, or violence. Many have never known a home other than the United States, having arrived here as infants. Whether you know it or not, these are our neighbors. They come to our Food Pantry and work in our stores and service our cars and take care of our properties. Might they also be the masks of God? Might they also be the guises in which Jesus appears to us?

For the second time this year at our Deacon’s meeting, we discussed the prospect of inviting a person, or a family, threatened with deportation to reside here in our church building. We had discussed that prospect back in February as well, and the Deacons had offered unanimous consent that this was something we ought to pursue. Since then, I had received an email suggesting that, if we were willing, we might soon be asked to house someone here in the church who was under threat of immediate deportation. While that particular case didn’t come to pass, it did make plain that the moment of being asked could arrive suddenly and without warning, and it seemed to me that we needed to be prepared. I’m pleased to share that the Deacons remained steadfast that our community should be willing to provide sanctuary to such an individual if called upon.

Here’s what it would mean. Thus far, immigration agents have agreed not to enter houses of worship to arrest people. And so that individual would have to reside within this building. We’ve asked about whether our refugee house would work, but unfortunately it won’t. Only houses of worship apply, which in this case entails this whole contiguous building. Working with our property committee and our Sunday School team, we’ve been able to identify a room that we think would work well for such

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<sup>1</sup> Kuljian, Christa, *Sanctuary: How an Inner-City Church Spilled Onto a Sidewalk*, (South Africa: Jacana Press, 2013), pg. 164.

a residency. We think we've located enough furniture to make it habitable, and Lina Tuck, our immigration assistance coordinator, is working with her list of volunteers to coordinate other details, such as food.

But other questions came up during our Deacon's meeting, such as the following: Is it illegal to provide sanctuary at a church? The answer to that is no. In order to do this legally, we would have to conduct a press conference immediately upon receiving an individual or family, and we would have to notify both the local police and ICE. We can't be furtive about this. We wouldn't be contravening the law, so much as seeking to slow the legal process down, so that an appeals process can do its work. Another question: how long would this individual stay here? The answer is that we don't know. There are several churches in the New Haven area providing sanctuary at the moment. One individual has resided in a church in downtown New Haven for several months now, while another went into sanctuary, and was granted a stay by the court 4 days later. So it's impossible to determine how long it could last. Another question: will this individual or family be "safe" for our community, meaning will they have criminal backgrounds? The answer to that is a qualified no. These are individuals who have been screened by a team of lawyers currently assigned to them, whose cases allow for some hope of an extension, or an appeal, or a legal path toward residency. They could, theoretically, have police records involving minor infractions, but we wouldn't be asked to harbor violent criminals, or anyone, really, whose case was at a legal dead end. But again, what we would be allowing is a temporary cessation of the deportation process, so that an appeals process can unfold in a fair and timely manner.

But here's the last, and most important question: why should the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme engage in such an activity? To that, I point first to the portrait of Paul Verryn hanging in our corridor. Why should we honor him so, why should we sustain our relationship with Paul, inviting him to visit us and preach and pray over us, if we're not prepared to enact the sort of theology he has envisioned, and the sort of hospitality that he has enacted? Paul Verryn is one of our angels, a messenger, offering us a clear vision of what it means to be a people of bold faith in the world. So too, I would point to the long history of this congregation, courageously challenging what the Apostle Paul called the powers and principalities of this world. We've done it near, and we've done it far, but it's been a consistent part of our 352 year history. I do occasionally hear the complaint that we ought to be worrying about what goes on in our backyard more than we do about what happens in other places around the globe, and while I have questions about that dichotomy and the ideological biases that undergird it, this is a moment when I can say: now's our chance to address what's happening in our own backyards. Now's our chance to speak forcefully about something befalling our neighbors here in Connecticut. But finally, and most importantly, I'd answer in a theological vein. I'd review all the instances in the Bible when God appears incognito, under cover of a mask. I'd point to those instances in the Bible when we're instructed to find Jesus among the dispossessed, the homeless, and in this case, the stateless. And I would point to that passage in the book of Revelation, that depicts Jesus as standing outside the church, waiting to come in, as if he were a refugee, as if he were a migrant, as if he were under threat of deportation. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," Jesus says. Were we to open the door, I suspect we would open ourselves to a rather large, and indefinite, project. But I also suspect we would be opening ourselves to an enlargement

of our hearts, an enlargement of our world, an enlargement of our faith. I suspect we would be opening the door to an immense opportunity to grow as people of faith and conscience.

Jesus continues to knock. How shall we answer?