

About a thousand years ago, I went off to college in Jackson, Mississippi. One day over the Christmas holidays, I decided to drive out to see my Great-Aunt Ozilla. She lived in a very small town outside of Jackson. She came to the door, gave me a hug, and her first words were, "If I'd known you were comin' I'd have baked a cake." She told me that she didn't have much food in the house, but then proceeded to spread out several meats about six vegetables and homemade bread, two different kinds of salad, three kinds of pie, plus leftover fruit cake.

Of course, she apologized for not being able to offer more. If you're from the South, you understand her predicament. But it's nothing new, is it?

Our scripture today tells us that Abraham did just that. Here he is, relaxing at the door of his tent in the heat of the day when three strangers show up. Abraham was the precursor of desert hospitality. From the time of Abraham up to today, the nomadic Arab received guests with the flats of the tent and the recesses of his heart OPEN.

Another custom of that time was for the host to feed the guest even **before** asking about the purpose of the visit. Would **we** invite strangers into our home before hearing the purpose of their visit? Probably not often, if ever. First, we ask for identification, and **then** we decide whether or not to welcome the visitor.

Another tradition was that once strangers touched the tent ropes and asked for protection, they were safe. And, while the two enemies sit together, they might even come up with a peaceful solution to their conflict. So, hospitality can serve as a healing balm. It is understandable although perhaps lamentable that we no longer adhere to an "open flap" policy.

Abraham was probably not aware of any divine visitation, yet he treats these three travelers as God-sent. So, he runs from the tent door to meet them, bows himself down to the earth and entreats them to accept his hospitality.

He welcomes these three strangers, gives them a seat under the refreshing shade of the oak, brings them water and food, water to wash their feet. He makes an initial offering of a small "morsel of bread." And he says, "If I'd known you were coming

I'd have baked a cake." Then he actually served them a whole calf plus cakes and milk.

With Christmas, with the birth of the Christ, we welcomed another stranger. The story became real, came to life and lived here with us. But now the packed room of Christmas Eve is over, the excitement of Christmas Day is over, yet it isn't quite time for spring or Easter yet.

So, what do we do for an encore? It can be a strange and difficult time of the church year. This is the season when people are recuperating from the rush and expense of the holidays, staying home to enjoy their Christmas presents or traveling or skiing or sleeping! So, what do we do for an encore?

We've watched the angels and the archangels, and the youth and the children bring us the Advent and Christmas story for the past four weeks.

All of that is a difficult act to follow. So, what DO we do for an encore?

Well, what we do have coming up but what we probably haven't made too much of in the past is EPIPHANY – a "manifestation." Perhaps you've had an "epiphany," a moment of sudden revelation or insight - an "ah ha!" moment.

In the Church year, it is the "ah ha!" of Emmanuel - the revelation that God has come to be with us.

We commonly celebrate this as the time when the Magi - the Wise Men – three strangers came to visit. They came not to a tent like Abraham's, but to a stable. These sages traveled across the desert to become guests at a stable.

So, what do we do for an encore? We watch this week and every week from now on. We watch for an "ah ha!" that God is with us. Perhaps it will be a visitation from three strangers, three angels, three Magi or Wise Ones.

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me in." And these strangers who arrive may bring us more tidings of great joy. Amen?