

Hasidic Jews tell the story of a beloved rabbi who served the *shtetl*, the Jewish community, residing in a small village in eastern Poland. The rabbi was much beloved: a kind, compassionate man, very learned, very wise. The community was delighted to have him.

There was just one thing: the rabbi had the unusual habit of disappearing during sabbath services. Now, we tend to think of rabbis in rather the same way we think of priests. But, in fact, their roles are different. Rabbis don't preside over services in the way priests do. He (or she, depending on the tradition of Judaism involved) may not be present at all. What makes a rabbi a rabbi is his or her authority to make authoritative interpretations of Jewish law. So it wasn't that worship would come to halt if the rabbi slipped out for a while, as he did most sabbaths.

Still, it was unsettling to the community. It occasioned much discussion. Why would he do this? Why would he leave them? Eventually the community decided that the rabbi loved them so much that he disappeared to ascend into heaven and bring their needs directly to God.

They decided to put this theory to the test. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in the Jewish year, was fast approaching. The

community decided that if the rabbi ascended to heaven, surely he would do so on Yom Kippur to plead with God that each of them would be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year. They appointed two respected members of the community to keep their eyes on the rabbi at all times on Yom Kippur, and if he slipped out of their service, to follow him.

Yom Kippur arrived. It's a very long liturgy. Everyone settled into the synagogue. About a third of the way through, the rabbi quietly rose and slipped out a side door. The two men followed.

They followed as he left the synagogue and began walking down a dirt road that led out of the village into the forest beyond. The rabbi made his way through the forest, the two men following him at a distance so they wouldn't be noticed. Finally, the rabbi stopped at a peasant hut and went inside.

The men knew who lived there. The whole community did. It was an old woman whom everyone detested. She was nasty, abusive, bitter, resentful. No one would have anything to do with her. The two men crept up to the hut and peered through a window.

They saw the rabbi sitting with her, asking how she'd been and whether there was anything he could do to help her. She answered with a stream of

abuse. The rabbi asked if she was hungry, and then got up to fix her something to eat. She cursed his ability as a cook. As she ate, he got a broom and swept up a bit, listening calmly to her tirade the whole time. Then he sat down, tried to comfort her, slipped her a little money, told her he'd be back on the sabbath, and got up to leave.

The two men hid behind trees as he left the hut and followed discretely as the rabbi made his way back to the village. He slipped in the same side door and resumed his place in the assembly. The two men did the same.

When the Yom Kippur service ended, the villagers rushed outside and asked the two men, "Is it true? Is it true? Does our rabbi ascend to heaven?" "Yes, it's true. He does.", they answered.

And he had.

The two men knew that ascending to heaven, or bringing heaven, bringing God, to the here and now, amounts to the same thing. And that's what the rabbi was doing.

In his own way, the rabbi was being “Emmanuel,” “God is with us,”¹ and when God is with us, so too is heaven. Not that the rabbi was God; of course not. But he wanted others to see the Lord through him. He wasn’t concerned about ascending to heaven himself; he wanted to bring heaven (or a little piece of it, anyway) to his community — particularly to the outcast and to the stranger — so that others wouldn’t have so steep a climb ascending to heaven themselves.

I’ve known people like the rabbi. So have many of you. I call them “heaven-bearers”. When they’re around, you know you’re in the presence of something holy. It isn’t the person, the “heaven-bearer” him- or herself who’s holy. In fact, they’re often flawed, sometimes deeply so. But despite their flaws, they know who God is and they’re willing to let Him use them as His instrument, and the Lord can paint something wonderful and beautiful with even the most imperfect brush.

He can do this not because of who we are, but because of who He is.

¹ Isa 7:14; Mt 1:23 (NAB).

We saw that when Abraham confronted God in the First Reading this morning.

Abraham pleads with God, bargains with God, argues with Him. And how does he do it? By reminding God of who God Himself is. Abraham stresses that God's very nature is love, compassion, mercy. That's the whole basis of his argument. (And the very fact that Abraham is arguing with God is itself powerful evidence that Abraham's argument is sound. Why would anyone be so stupid as to argue with a cruel, unforgiving God, one just waiting for an opportunity to punish us?). As one Jewish commentary puts it, "Abraham's challenge to God is rooted in the audacious claim that even God is subject to the moral standards divinely decreed for humans. If God is to be obeyed when commanding moral behavior, God must exemplify that moral behavior ... 'Do not exact strict justice upon these people!', [Abraham is saying], 'You, Lord, know how weak human nature is. You know how hard it is to be a good person ... Treat them more leniently than strict justice would require.'"²

² "Meshekh Hokhman," quoted in *Etz Hayim*, David L. Lieber, ed., The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), p. 103

In effect, Paul makes the same point Abraham does in the Second Reading. As we heard, Paul reminds the church in Colossae that “even when you were dead (in) transgressions ... he [the Lord] brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”³ Paul reminds us that we’re called to new life not to be condemned, but to be forgiven; not to suffer the Lord’s wrath, but to enjoy His love. That’s the Good News, the piece of heaven, that Paul brought to the people and places he encountered in his travels.

Paul was a “heaven-bearer”.

That’s what we’re called to be, too.

Every Mass ends with the dismissal. The deacon, if one is present, or a priest, if one is not, sends us out into the world. There are a number of dismissals that a cleric can use. The one I always use is “Go in peace.” We live in a time of war. Our job is to bring peace, the peace of Christ, to a strife-torn country and world. No one of us can change the world, but we can bring a piece of heaven to the little corner of it we touch.

³ Col 2:13 (NAB).

We can help people glimpse the mercy of God by not being wrathful ourselves.

We can help people glimpse the forgiveness of God by not trafficking in bitterness and recrimination ourselves.

We can help people glimpse the love and embrace of God by not judging and rejecting others ourselves.

We can remind people that there's a better way, Christ's way, than the mess of prejudice and indifference, hatred and inhumanity that we find ourselves in by not becoming evangelists for the mess ourselves.

When we do these things, we'll be closer to heaven ourselves, and others will, too.