

## 5. The Hidden Guest

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You prayed. You prepared. You waited for God to appear. But when someone knocked, who was there? This Sufi\* tale asks: What if the Presence we seek has already come—and we failed to recognise it?

The Christian path invites us to seek Christ—not only in stillness, but in the ordinary, the unwanted, and the easily missed. Jesus told us clearly: 'I was hungry and you gave me nothing... Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

This Sufi story opens our eyes to the presence of the Holy in forms we resist or disregard. In prayer, we may long for radiance or ecstasy, but the deeper transformation may come from recognizing Christ in the face of weariness, hunger, or weakness. Contemplative maturity requires not only inner stillness, but a kind of awakened seeing—an availability to love where we least expect it. The story challenges us not to spiritual laziness, but to spiritual attentiveness: that we might bow, inwardly, before the next person we are tempted to dismiss.

*(\*) The story commonly told as "The Hidden Guest" or "God Came Three Times" is not originally or exclusively Sufi, but it has been retold within the Sufi tradition, especially in collections aimed at interfaith teaching or universal wisdom (e.g., Idries Shah's *Wisdom of the Idiots*, or popular retellings from Rumi circles).*

### 1. The Hidden Guest

A devout man spent his life in prayer, preparing for the day he would meet God face to face. One day, a voice came in his heart:

"Tomorrow I will visit you."

The man rose early, cleaned his home, and prepared a fine meal. He waited all morning.

At midday, a poor beggar knocked, asking for water and a crust of bread.

"I'm expecting someone important," the man said. "Please try next door."

Later, a tired old woman passed by, bent with age. She asked to rest.

"Not today," the man said gently. "I have a special guest coming."

As the sun set, a young orphan stood shyly at the gate. The man sighed.

"Not now, child. Come back tomorrow."

Night came. God did not arrive. In his disappointment, the man prayed:

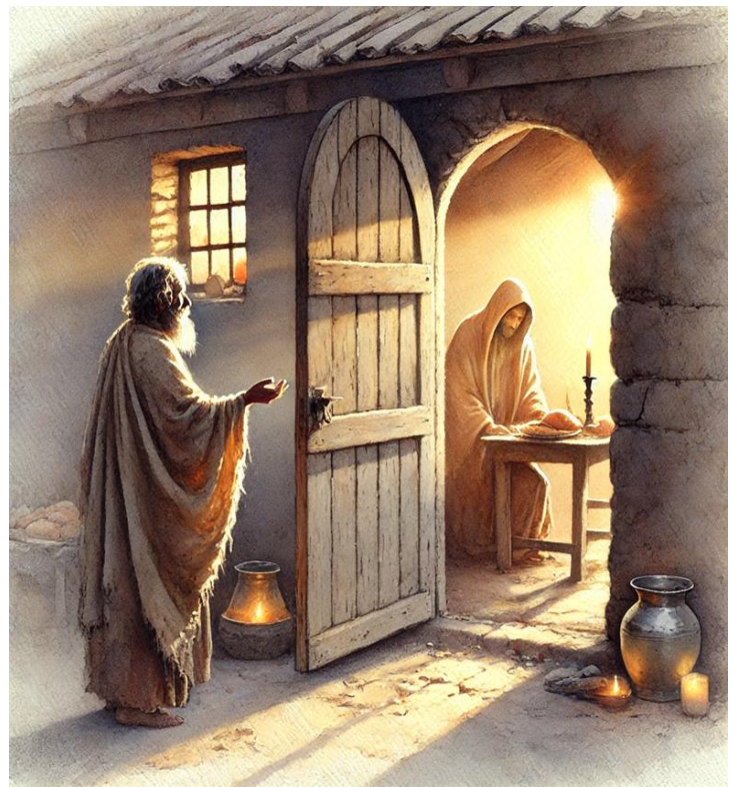
“Lord, you said you would visit me!”  
And in the stillness, the voice returned:  
“I came to you three times today. But  
you did not recognise me.”

*Source: Adapted from a traditional story retold in Sufi, Christian, and Hasidic sources.*

Reflection: Sometimes our longing for God is so focused, so inward, that we fail to see the Holy right in front of us. This story challenges a prayer life that waits passively or clings to visions of the divine wrapped in light. It reminds us that true contemplation sharpens our love, not just our stillness. *The Psalmist said, “Be still and know...”*. *Jesus did not only say, ‘Be still’ (to the storm on the Sea of Galilee), and “Peace be with you”. He also said, ‘Feed them.’* And when we fail to see him in the ordinary, we fail to meet him altogether.

## 2. Discussion Questions

- When has God come to you in a form you almost overlooked?
- Is it easier for you to seek God in prayer than in people? Why?
- How might your contemplative practice sharpen—not soften—your attention to others?
- Do you associate holiness with beauty, quiet, or dignity? What happens when those expectations are overturned?





### 3. Scripture and Contemplative Echoes

#### Old Testament

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke... to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter?  
— *Isaiah 58:6-7*

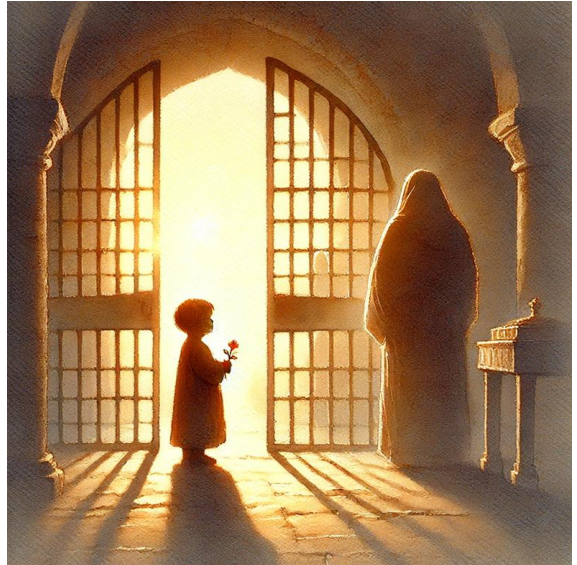
Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. — *Hebrews 13:2*

#### New Testament

I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink... Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. — *Matthew 25:42,45*

If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother... cannot love God. — *1 John 4:20*

Though I have the gift of prophecy... but do not have love, I am nothing. — *1 Corinthians 13:2*



## Contemplative Christian Writers

God is not hidden in the heavens but disguised in the human. Christ is not waiting for us in visions, but stands at the intersection of our distraction and our compassion. When we pray to see the face of God, we must be ready to see a face lined with poverty, sorrow, or fatigue. To love God is to love this world as it is, not only as we imagine it might become. — *Richard Rohr, The Universal Christ, p. 133*

A contemplative practice that does not make us more aware of suffering or more tender toward the forgotten is not yet rooted in Christ. Christ is always hidden in the poor. Hidden not because he wishes to remain unseen, but because we have become blind to his simplest disguises. — *Henri Nouwen, Here and Now, p. 45*

God comes to us in moments we are least prepared to call holy. A ringing phone, a crying child, a beggar's knock—these are not distractions from God but invitations into the heart of love. Contemplation doesn't pull us away from life—it throws us back into it with softer eyes. — *Br. David Steindl-Rast, Music of Silence, p. 84*

The spiritual life is not a private refuge from the world but a new way of entering it. In the eyes of the poor, we see the mystery of Christ's hidden presence. The Eucharist demands we recognize him not only in bread and wine, but also in bruised and weathered

skin. — *Jean Vanier, Community and Growth, p. 219*

The greatest prayer may be the one we live in silence while washing feet, changing sheets, offering a meal. In these small hidden acts, God is often more powerfully revealed than in our highest spiritual ecstasies. Contemplation means nothing if it does not awaken compassion. — *Etty Hillesum, An Interrupted Life, p. 132*

## In Verse

### I Spoke With God Today

I spoke with God today, when God  
was a troubled elderly woman  
locked into herself  
reaching out for help,  
scared of open spaces,  
afraid to go out

in a narrow room in her little house  
with presence and humble tools,  
she was helped to heal her fear,  
be well, and shed a now useless  
protective shell

we walked outside for a little stroll  
courage new-found as her light  
shone brighter then,  
and the sacrament  
mended me.

—funny how God ministers  
to godself this way.

*tony macelli*  
11-03-2017

## The Song

he the proud and she the obsessed  
did not listen, could not hear

but today, in a moment of rest  
a futility-born pause from thoughts  
they do for a moment hear  
a few fleeting bars of a strange,

unprecedented song  
that belongs to the night  
coming as if from far away  
from the long slow days of long ago

who sings the song, they want to know  
and who or what is hearing it?

when, by the grace and taste of God,  
they come upon their spirit  
their sacred breath,  
singing and listening

they become dancers in the night  
their love for others and each other  
an art of the heart,  
singing and listening

then they may slowly start to pass away  
as they come into being.

*tony macelli*  
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