

ELCA Region 9 - Sermon for July 17, 2022 (Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – C year)  
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Genesis 18:1-10a - The hospitality of Abraham and Sarah to three visitors of the Lord

Psalms 15 - Lord, who may abide upon your holy hill?

Colossians 1:15-28 - Hymn to Christ, the firstborn of all creation

Luke 10:38-42 - Jesus says: Martha, your sister Mary has chosen the better part

Today we have something of an Advent theme here in the brightness of mid-summer! Not one but two of our readings relate stories of our faith forebears welcoming the Lord into their midst, just as we emphasize every Advent as we look toward Christmas and the celebration of Jesus' arrival into the world.

In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah receive God's three angelic representatives as they make their way down to the Valley of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in Luke, Mary and Martha receive Jesus himself into their home for a meal and conversation.

If we let ourselves daydream for a moment, let's ask what it might be like if we were to look up and see the Lord coming up to our home for a visit. How might we react? What would our first priorities be before there was a knock on the door? I suppose that, in addition to wishing that I had done the cleaning I was supposed to, I might worry a bit about what this visit was for. Was this going to be a delivery of some special blessing? An extra measure of grace for my day? Surely he must need something from me – perhaps I had better brace myself to be sent on an unexpected errand. What if he's bringing bad news or has come to point out some especially offensive sin that he has noticed?

What a surprise it would be if the Lord sat down at my table and said he just wanted to talk. I imagine the Lord liking coffee, so I would probably have already offered some. But what then? I'm not sure what stories I would tell or what questions I would ask. But whatever might happen next, I suspect that the Lord would be the one directing the conversation and that it might indeed include something surprising, whether welcome or not. For my part, when I imagine such an encounter, I can't get away from the image of Jesus addressing his disciples at the Last Supper, sadly warning Peter that he would deny him and confidently sending Judas with the words "What you have to do, do quickly." I imagine Jesus at the house of Simon the Pharisee, scolding his host and the disciples for disparaging a woman there to do a good work. I imagine him responding to his critics when he visited the house of Matthew the tax collector. So I brace myself a little bit in preparation for being set straight about something.

But while there is bold truth-telling in these gospel home visits, I might also imagine the richness of blessing in other stories. Jesus tells Zacchaeus that salvation had come to his house. Jesus heals the mother-in-law of Peter. Jesus blesses the woman with the expensive perfume for her act of sacrifice. And in our stories today, God promises a child to Sarah, and Jesus commends Mary for her attentiveness to his word.

So perhaps the bottom line should be: When the Lord shows up, be ready for anything.

I said before that if I saw the Lord coming down the walk to my front door, my first instinct would probably be to make sure there was coffee ready. I seem to have that in common with Sarah, Abraham, and Martha in today's stories. They all show a desire to hurry up and be hospitable, as if God does not have all the time in the world. Perhaps that is a natural reaction for them, and it probably would be for us.

I suspect that a quick survey of believers would actually find most people pretty interested in the idea of a personal visit from the Almighty, even as we suspect that it would probably never happen quite exactly like this. And yet, we surely encounter God's presence, God's visitors, Jesus and his siblings – those he described as “the least of these” – every day. All around us we have the sorrowful, the stressed, the poor and struggling, the mistreated. Jesus has promised to be present in the lives and perhaps in the very persons of those who are experiencing such things. If we wait for the big, powerful, obvious displays that we associate with God's presence, we're likely to miss the mysterious and subtle ways in which God comes to us all the time.

Abraham seems to have known this – when God visited him, it was in the form of three angels, “messengers” – and because Abraham was one to pay attention, somehow he knew. We're reminded of John the beloved disciple, perhaps many days after Jesus' resurrection, when a strange visitor on the Galilean shore shouted fishing advice to him and his companions in the boat. John somehow knew and said, “It is the Lord.”

Now I have a lot of sympathy for Martha in today's gospel story, because I am one to stress out over whether things are getting done the way they should, and I of all people am probably the most likely to miss the presence of Jesus right in front of me. So I get a little defensive inside when I hear Martha being criticized for tending to her hospitality duties and apparently ignoring Jesus, because I know that I would be doing the same thing. We need to be cautious here, because the criticism of Martha's busy work is not a suggestion that we should all give up work on our congregation's ministry team and stay home to pray and read the Bible! We're not supposed to choose between our spiritual life and acts of service.

What we learn from Martha's experience is that she was trying hard to feed Jesus, but she was not allowing the chance for him to feed her the way he was feeding Mary. She presented him with what must have been a fine meal, but she forgot that there is something even more valuable that he desires – her own deepest, truest self, with all her joys and despairs, her strongest loves and darkest fears, secrets and questions. Whatever else she might set before him, this is what he would most want for her to present, what Jesus calls “the one needful thing.”

Christian interpreters through the centuries have noticed in the Sarah & Abraham story that the things they bring to their angelic visitors show their attention to this one needful thing. Abraham calls for bread to be made, not just of any flour, but of choice flour. He calls not for an ordinary animal to be prepared, but a good and tender calf, the most valuable in the herd, things reserved for only the most distinguished of guests. It is as if to say that we ought to set before the Lord all that is most valuable and important to us. As we examine our lives and discover there what we guard the most, what

occupies most of our attention and where most of our energy is invested, it is those parts of our lives that we most ought to present to our Lord and God.

So Martha's story may sound like a bit of a rebuke, but it actually includes a powerful message of grace, the same grace that God extends to us when we sometimes find ourselves desperately seeking God yet also desperately needing to get our tasks done and maybe overlooking God's close companionship right in that moment. God's promise is that the very ones we are working hard to serve are there to share God's love and God's presence with us. When we start to notice that, we shouldn't be surprised if we then hear the soothing words of Jesus, who was not there to scold Martha and doesn't come to scold us, but dearly desires to make himself available to our scattered lives, where so much seems to press on us that we wonder if we can ever manage it all.

I pray God's richest blessings on those who are ready to serve – I give deep and heartfelt thanks to you who step up and step in to take on the tasks that allow the church's work to get done, who find your vocation in the body of Christ and live it out, not caring for any reward. We should, then, while we are giving so much, also be ready to receive, and especially to trust God with that which is most dear and sacred to us – our innermost thoughts and feelings, the confession of our most frightening sins, and our most troubling of doubts and questions.

God comes to us in this way, not jumping out of a stained-glass window in full biblical dress – at least not usually! – but God comes by being present in each of life's situations we encounter from moment to moment each day. Each time we have a task, each time we meet someone in need or who has a story they need to tell, we are given the chance to welcome God and let God also meet our every need.

Our gospel story ends with this remark that Jesus makes, "Martha, you are concerned about many things, but one thing is needful; Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken away from her." I have often wondered what happened next. We are not told, but I would like to think that in the middle of a dinner that was no doubt scrumptious, the one who was really fed was Martha, who I hope not only ended up sitting at the feet of Jesus, but also learned anew – as we must also! – how to follow the example of Sarah, Abraham, and Mary and to welcome the guest, God, into her life.

In the name of Christ, Amen.