

Genesis 18:1-10a, Psalm 15, Colossians 1:15-28, Luke 10:38-42

“The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.”

I was wondering, as I read this passage from Genesis, whether Abraham showed such devotion to hospitality for all his guests, or if he immediately knew that on that day he was being visited by God.

I think he was always very hospitable. I believe that was part of his righteousness – that he cared for the needs of all, even strangers, who came by his tent.

But I think he also knew this was God. Perhaps it was the unusual appearance of the visitors, who were very suddenly right near him by the oaks, even though he should have had a clear view of their approach from his tent entrance if they had come in a natural way.

Or perhaps he just knew, because he recognized the presence of God. Because he had known God, served God, and communed with God in prayer throughout his life. And in these three men – whom we Christians might also recognize, since we know God as Triune – in these three men, Abraham senses the presence of the Lord.

And what does he do then? He runs!

But not away, like some of us might be tempted to do in the sudden presence of God. Not like Simon Peter, who, on first meeting Jesus bowed down and said, “Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”

No, Abraham runs towards the men. And he begs them to stay a little while with him. To rest with him. To have some water and a little bread. They agree.

But Abraham’s household doesn’t actually give them bread and water, they prepare a feast. Abraham hurries to his wife Sarah, and says, “Get flour – make cakes!”

He runs to the herd and selects a calf and asks his servant to prepare it. And he himself gets the milk and cheese, and the now-cooked meat, and he runs back, to stand in the presence of the Lord as God feasts.

Of course, this can’t have been instantaneous. You can’t roast meat or bake cakes instantly. But the whole household musters to prepare the meal quickly. To make ready for the Lord, and also to be present with him – to listen and hear his words.

Abraham stood near to his guests as they ate. But we know he didn't simply rest while his wife and servant labored on. We know this because the calf was already cooked when Abraham went to the three men. We know this because a few lines later we could read that Sarah was also in earshot, listening to the Lord at the entrance to her tent. She heard the Lord say that she would have a son, and she laughed.

Abraham and Sarah worked together to prepare for the Lord. And then they listened to his word and receive his blessing together, too.

Compare this, then, to the story of Martha and Mary in today's gospel. Jesus comes to a village, and Martha welcomes him into her home. Maybe it was in a very similar way to Abraham – maybe she ran up to him to invite him, and hurried home to prepare when he accepted. She was probably thrilled that he did agree to spend some time with her and her household.

But things don't progress in quite the lovely way that Abraham and Sarah's feast did. As the story continues, we don't see everyone sitting and listening to God's word. Mary does this. She sits at the feet of Jesus and learns from him. But Martha is distracted by her many tasks.

Such a short story invites so much speculation. Did Mary not help enough, and leave her sister with the burden of preparations? Did Martha take on too much, and let her preparations get out of hand?

Was Martha simply trying to be hospitable to her guest? Or is it possible that she was trying to "overachieve" – to show off, and in the process let her pride cause her to miss when Jesus actually began to speak?

I don't really want to throw too much blame on Martha. She often gets a lot of blame, since Jesus' words hold up Mary's choice over hers. But maybe she would have been done sooner if Mary had helped more. I'm not sure so much condemnation needs to go on her.

I suspect Martha was truly distressed to find herself in the kitchen when Jesus was teaching. Being stuck in the kitchen during a party, or having to run out and miss time with guests to pick up a forgotten supply is something many of us have experienced. It's frustrating and it's unfortunate.

But something does turn bitter in Martha as her frustration builds. She goes to her *guest*, Jesus, and tries to get *him* to make Mary leave him and go back to the chores. As if she is saying, "If I can't find time to sit with God and listen to Him, she can't either."

Jesus' answer calls Martha to a different priority. He calls her to a simplicity of focus. When he says, "You are worried and distracted by many things. There is need of only one thing," I don't think he is condemning her. I think he is inviting her – to sit down! She has done enough. Now do the most important thing – listen to God's word.

And of course, *she is doing just that* as he speaks this teaching directly to her.

The way we often translate “Mary has chosen the better part” makes it sound to many of our ears like there were two jobs that had to be done, and Martha got stuck with the crummy one. But this phrase could also be translated, “Mary has made the better choice” – to lay aside distractions and sit at Jesus’ feet. That choice is still open to Martha as well.

Jesus has a habit of calling people who are busy or distracted. He called Peter and Andrew while they were fishing. He called James and John to drop the nets they were in the middle of mending. They had significant work they were busy with. Jesus called them to set it down – to turn themselves to the one, crucial thing – to know God. To be with Him.

And of course, all other ministry – all our love and labor and service, flow out again from that one, central necessary encounter with God.

I don’t think this is a story of Martha getting her knuckles rapped by Jesus. I think his words brought her up short, as they might bring us up short, as well, if we identify at all with Martha. But this is not the story of a condemnation.

It’s the story of a call.

Perhaps this is the moment when Martha dropped everything and sat at Jesus feet. It does mark a turn for her, because we know she did go on to listen to the words of God who had come to her – like Mary and Abraham and Sarah before her.

We know she did listen to Jesus’ teachings, because not so long after this day, we find her meeting Jesus on the way to the tomb of her brother, Lazarus.

She goes out to meet Jesus once more. And she tells him that she believes her brother will rise again at the last day. She has been listening to some theology!

And she identifies Jesus – an accomplishment few manage before his resurrection. “Lord,” she says, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the son of God.” Martha clearly heard Jesus’ words.

So not condemn Martha. Neither should we condemn Mary. They are both examples of women who received and accepted the gracious love of God. Who welcomed God into their homes and their selves.

Jesus wanted them both to sit and learn Love from him. As he wants for each of us as well. Can we set down our distractions, our worries, our busyness, and do the same?