



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church & Student Center

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The Rev. Ryan Hall, Curate
Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 11
Revised Common Lectionary Year C
St. Mark's on the Campus
June 10, 2007

Old Testament	Psalm	New Testament Epistle	Gospel
Genesis 18:1-10a	Psalm 15	Colossians 1:15-28	Luke 10:38-42

Have you ever had coffee...on the roof of a building? I have, and I am not talking about a Starbucks on the top floor of some posh sky scraper. If you have ever been to the Middle East, especially some place like Jerusalem, you have probably had the chance to see many of the little coffee shops and restaurants that have patios for dining on the roof of their buildings.

It is really quite amazing to sit upon the top of a building and look down and see a city that has been around since well before the English language came into being. I got to sit in just such a place in Jerusalem many years ago and have Arabic coffee, coffee so strong they add cracked cardamom pods to it. I was always amazed at how hospitable my Muslim host was, but I always found it interesting my host would never sit with me as I ate or sipped my coffee.

He would come up and serve me, and he would always be hovering just within earshot, but he would never sit with me. I only found out some years later that Middle Eastern hosts find it somewhat taboo to actually sit with whomever it is they are hosting. This is true not only of commercial restaurants but even if you are invited into someone's home as a dinner guest. For a host to sit down and enjoy himself would mean that the host is not being fully attentive to his guest, something good hospitable hosts would never do.

As we heard in the Old Testament lesson from Genesis, hospitality in the Holy Land and various other parts of what we now call the Middle East, was a very important facet of that culture in Abraham's time, just as it largely is to this very day.

Abraham is visited by the Lord in the form of three men. It was largely believed during this time period of the bible that a mortal human being could not look upon the face of God and live, so oftentimes when a character in the Old Testament is visited by God, God is forced to take on a more palatable form...in this instance, three angels.

From the Christian tradition, there has been a long interpretation of this story of the three angels visiting Abraham as a harbinger of the Trinity. There are many beautiful Eastern Orthodox Icons that like to use this story in Holy Depictions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While this interpretation might very well be true, the original intent of this passage was probably not a Trinitarian statement, however. In the Old Testament, an angel always had only one, and only one, purpose for an angel was sent to carry one specific message or task from God.

Thus, with 3 angels, we are alerted in this story to the fact that this group of angelic visitors had three purposes. One angel brought the good tidings to Abraham that his wife Sarah was pregnant, a fact that when Sarah heard it, she started laughing. The other two angels carried messages we would learn only by reading further than the snippet from the lectionary today. When we do read further into the Genesis story we learn that the second angel has been sent with task save Abraham's nephew Lot. The third angel's task was much more ominous...let's just say his task was to pronounce divine judgment against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

I am sure you are wondering exactly what the story of Abraham and the three angelic visitors has to do with anything. Remember what I said about the importance of hospitality? When God calls someone to the service of hospitality, the person who offers the hospitality does not always know whom it is he or she is serving. The guest may be a pleasant guest who brings glad tidings, but they might also be a guest whom you may not like.

I, myself, being originally from the American South, was brought up to take great pride in being hospitable. Or, as my grandmother used to say, "if you have someone over to your house, and they want to eat the table cloth, you let 'em because they are your guest." Those offering hospitality don't get to be choosy about their guests once the hospitality has been offered and accepted. Hospitality can be taxing work.

With this background of hospitality, we come to this week's interesting but brief gospel story. Last week, if you recall, we heard one of Jesus' most well known parables about the Good Samaritan. We have all heard that story about the man who was beaten and bleeding to death by the side of the road, only to have a priest and a Levite come by both "Holy men," but both simply ignore him, and actually cross the path so that they could walk by the man on the other side of the street. It was of course the good Samaritan, the social outcast of 1st century Jewish society, that comes by and shows compassion.

This parable is so well known that the term "being a Good Samaritan" has passed into the English vernacular as a term that even people who have never set foot in a church in their lives would probably recognize. Some laws have even been enacted in various countries under the title "Good Samaritan laws." The idea of such laws being to force people to act in compassionate ways, even if they aren't actually involved in a particular accident and are complete bystanders.

The idea of forcing people by law to be compassionate is all sorts of interesting social and cultural commentary, and as tempting as it is to preach on this, that is a white rabbit to be chased in some other sermon.

I did, however, refresh our memory on last week's gospel lesson about the good Samaritan, because the gospel reading for today is the very next story in the Gospel of Luke following Jesus' incident with the lawyer last week. Jesus and his disciples have moved on to the home of Martha.

As last week's story about the good Samaritan was a lesson about compassion from an person who should be the last person you would expect to be a disciple who manifests the love of God, this week's lesson takes that same idea of compassion and discipleship a step further.

I always feel for poor Martha in this story because she seems to come off like the "bad guy" because Jesus seems to get on her case, as it were, for being to "worried and distracted by many things." I am sure those of us who have heard this story preached on in church before have heard the sermon (probably more than once) about how we should not be anxious and upset like Martha.

While it is true we should not be anxious and upset, I think we Americans (who love to define ourselves by our jobs and work in environments obsessed with work productivity) are more likely to sympathize with poor Martha, who is just trying to make sure her guest gets fed, while her seemingly good-for-nothing sister Mary seems to be sitting around doing absolutely nothing constructive.

I do not believe either of these interpretations are totally correct. Mary and Martha, both of whom are followers of Jesus, are each trying in their own way to serve Jesus and manifest hospitality. While Martha was concerned about how she might feed the Lord, Mary was concerned about paying attention to her guest and how she might be fed by the Lord.

This is not as straightforward a story as the Good Samaritan where the characters fall clearly into good versus bad categories where we are admonished “to go and do likewise”. No, as what we have in this story that is not a commandment to go and do something constructive and positive like the Good Samaritan. What we have in the words of Jesus is very similar to the messages of the three angels that visit Abraham. For in Jesus' response to Martha and Mary, we receive a message of good tidings, a message of warning, and a message of redemption and hope.

We receive good tidings in that we, like Mary and Martha, are all called to some form of loving ministry. God has a purpose for each of us. It can be anything, being on the Vestry, working in a soup kitchen, being a good husband or wife, perhaps there is even someone in here whom God is calling to ordained ministry. Whatever that calling might be, God calls us to show His hospitality to the world in various and numerous ways.

And yet in these glad tidings, there is a warning...a warning of burnout. Work and doing good deeds are important, but if we take on too much, commitments that make us anxious and nervous because we have so much to do, or if we are worrying about what other people appear to be doing better than us, or even if they appear for our personal point of view, to be doing nothing at all, we can become so burnt out that we fail to see God's forest of love for all the trees that we are frantically trying to tend.

And yet for all of us, wherever we are, there is also a message of hope and redemption. Just as God calls us to be hospitable to the world and to each other, God is also hospitable to us. In a few moments we will come to this table to join in Holy Communion with Him. Just as Abraham refreshed his three angelic visitors and Martha and Mary worked in their own ways to show hospitality to our Lord Jesus, let us choose the better part in allowing God to refresh us, or in the words of Eucharistic Prayer C (BCP pg. 372):

“Lord God of our Fathers: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name.” *Amen.*