

6th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 7.17.22

Genesis 18:1-10a

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. He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.

Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” (360)

I’ve been a pastor since 2001, long enough to have plenty to look back on, reflect on. I’ve had high points, and low ones. I’ve done some excellent work, and really messed up here and there. I have my Worst Performance at a Wedding, and Worst Attempt at Pastoral Care. My Worst Special Service was on Maundy Thursday a long while back. One of first times ever leading one, I wasn’t even that familiar with the service from the pews. It wasn’t a feast day much remembered in the church of my youth. A service to enact the night of Jesus’ arrest, the heart of it is the remembrance of Jesus’ last supper—and I forgot the bread.

I realized it in the middle of the service, after we'd had actual supper together, this which was folded into the liturgy. As I moved from the table of supper to the table of the Lord's Supper, I realized I'd left the loaf of bread elsewhere.

My mind raced. Where had I left it? Or had I not bought it? And what now could be done about it?

Across the street, the general store. Is it open? Can I run and get bread there?

Is there anything in the basement kitchen?

Mid-hymn, the few congregants there that evening were recounting, "It was a sad and solemn night..." My mind was everywhere but *there*, on that sad and solemn night.

The thing is, that's where the mind should be--on that sad and solemn night. It should be "as if." It should be in that moment.

There's a strange quality of time that happens in worship. You're removed from chronological time, you're more in time that's *kairos*, time that comes as all time in one moment. Chronos is ordinary time, time's chronology, its spooling out. Kairos is more immediate time, that moment that is pregnant, time that is ripe.

Charles Taylor, philosopher of many things, religion being one of them, plays with this distinction, chronos and kairos, ordinary time and gathered time, secular time and higher time or sacred time. He points out that, for example, Good Friday this year is closer in time to Good Friday last year than it is to the Thursday before that Friday, or the Saturday after. Good Friday 2022, when remembered as such, is closer to the crucifixion of Jesus two thousand years earlier than it is to some regular day two hundred years ago, or even twenty years ago. The reenactment of a crucial event makes present the event that might, in another sense, have been long ago, ages ago.

Maundy Thursday is just such a day. It is when it is, and it's not at any other time. When its moment has arrived, you're either there to meet it or you're not.

The general store wasn't open. The church kitchen was, as usual, bare. But even if they weren't, I realized I couldn't leave. Not now. To do so would break the spell of the

service, which I don't mean as if some sort of trickery were going on, but to recognize what happens when the Living Word is to speak and we've set our hearts to hear it. The Living Word casts a spell, and calls us into a different frame of mind for being in a different frame of *time*.

To run to the store in the middle of the service in some attempt to improve a flawed service (*seriously* flawed) would be choosing the less better part, so to speak.

This little story of Jesus and Mary and Martha: it's a tough one because Jesus isn't remembered to have addressed the problem at hand in way that's all that helpful. A pair of sisters different from one another but close to one another and affected by one another, or at least one affected by the other: this is a tough situation to find yourself in proximity to. I speak myself as one of a pair of sisters. And this I tell you: woe to the one who tells me my sister has chosen the better part, or says the same to her. We *really* don't need to hear that. See, I already *know* my sister is better than I am, and she already knows I'm better than her.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

There he will, like so many prophets before him, be killed for telling the people and their leaders things they didn't want to hear. That the better way than pride is love; that the better aim than triumph is life; that the better part than striving is devotion; that, though the people Israel and Judea had the steadfast faithfulness of God, they also had its corresponding imperative to seek justice, and so they shouldn't assume that God would act on their behalf if they continued to fail to enact among them God's reign: this sustaining truth was as a violation to the nation that wanted glory amidst empires, not the glory of humility in service of the least of the these, which is though in service of God.

Nations get it wrong all the time. Israel and Judea were no different from all the rest—which was very much the problem here. They were supposed to be different. They were supposed to be better.

He would be killed, crucified, the worst way. He knew it. He would make the journey anyway. And he would find rest as he went wherever he could find it, wherever the seventy sent out ahead of him could find it.

Once it was at Mary and Martha's house—old friends, it seems; people deeply and gratefully familiar. These two show up in another gospel, in John, as Lazarus' sisters, he who had died and whom Jesus raised. This fact, that they show up elsewhere, and the fact that they're named as the individual people they were, suggest Jesus knew them, perhaps knew them well. They were friends, I think, maybe even close friends, life-long friends—the sort of friends who can wade into one another's family dynamics without risking real violation. Maybe this was a familiar pattern to all three of them, that Martha was so much the striver while Mary was a dreamer which, having a close friend around, made her all the more so. Maybe this was something they even sometimes laughed about—Martha with her perfect propriety, Mary with her wondering mind.

I think of *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters.

You know, it's possible we're the ones violating something here. Here are three people whom we're overhearing and they're having their relationships while we consider just this one moment—and then judge them for it.

You know, the mother who's tolerating that outburst from her toddler at the grocery store might be doing so because the toddler has molars coming in and is in pain about it, hasn't slept in two nights. And the man whose wife harangues about the buttered popcorn at the movies might herself be worried about the doctor's warning that he must change his diet. And the friends at the next table over from you in the airport café might be bickering because they're going to a third friend's funeral after her sudden death. You never know. And it's so easy to take a moment and assume it's indicative of forever. You just never know. But sometimes you think you do.

Jesus is visiting. He's on his way to Jerusalem, and time is ticking. He has much to do. He has much to entrust to humanity to do—to gather in a new politics whose

organizing principle is love, to do so in order that the world might be saved, might not instead be consumed by its own spite and ambition, its own resentment or fear. And he must teach this by himself being love, being peace. You can't teach people to walk in the way of peace, to gather in the spirit of love, by taking out your urgent stress on them that they do so: "Be peaceful! Be loving!" I've had coxswains yell at me while rowing, "Relax! You gotta relax." It doesn't work that way. No, he had to *be* such things, though under pressure.

Mary and Martha have received him, which was likely an easy decision to make. "Of course, you can stay here!" And they knew the art and the imperative: you receive someone and make place for them, see to their needs while they're here. Hospitality was as old an art and imperative as Abraham, as old as Sarah. It's why that old story of Abraham and Sarah and three guests arrived out of the heat of the day is paired with this gospel lection for this morning—so we don't go too hard on Martha in her busyness, so we remember the high praise usually offered those who see graciously to their guests. (Don't forget the bread, Martha.)

Mary, though, recognizes something altogether more profound. Their old friend: there's something different this time. Something heavier, weightier. Something of greater substance, significance.

Pay attention.

Wait, just *wait*.

Preachers have often gotten themselves into trouble with this lection—gotten themselves into trouble when it comes to a certain sort in their congregations. They'll imply that 'tis better to come to Bible study than to fold the bulletins for Sunday worship, 'tis better to sit quietly in the pews than to be the one who's come early to get the hymn board ready and will stay after to wash the communion cups and meanwhile sits in the pews with eyes darting and mind casting about. The deacons, often the church ladies, will walk away

from that sort of preaching and wonder, “Pastor, do you not care that I raced to the grocery store when I realized nearly too late that we didn’t have bread for communion?”

Abraham and Sarah are here this morning, laying out milk and meat for their unexpected guests to correct for this problem before it even becomes one. All who made it so this moment could take place have played a crucial part. Whoever makes it so the Living Word can arrive and speak and be heard has done a crucial thing.

But there comes a time when the Word must arrive, must now speak, and what work of readying must be complete for now there is only receiving, now there is only hearing. And the readying might not be complete, not as much as you’d have liked, not as much as would be ideal. The bread might be crumbly. The altar flowers might be off center. The argument you had with your neighbor yesterday might be sticking to you, getting in your way. But the moment is now, and nothing else can be done but that you receive it.

It's now. The arrival we've been readying for has happened, and it's here. Now.

My dad was an airline pilot when I was growing up. Sometimes he'd be scheduled on a flight on Christmas, so we'd have Christmas some other day, the 26th, the 27th.

I was never convinced.

Jesus was the word, and he seemed to know it. His insistence that people pay attention to him wasn't arrogance on his part, though it's so easy to hear it that way. He wasn't conducting himself in the world as a personality that demanded attention. He was conducting himself as a presence that invited participation—in something good, in something of immediacy and love, in something that had the power to save. If you missed it, you might really find yourself having *missed* it.

You will miss this.

I happen to know lots of people who perform live performances of lots of sorts. When I hear of one of them and I realize I can't be there, I'll often say, “I'm sorry I'll miss it.” Once one responded, “That's fine. I'm sure I'll be okay.” And I had to make it clear: “I'm not sorry for *you*. I'm sorry for *me*. I know I'll be missing something good.” And it

won't be replicable. It's the sort of thing that can't be replicated. There will other chances like this. But this one will happen just once.

So much of life: it's all things that will happen just once. There will be other things *like* this. But this moment, this opportunity: this will happen just once, and then it's gone.

Jesus arriving at your house for a brief stay on his way to Jerusalem where he will be crowned the King of Peace though with a thorny crown: this happens just once.

Don't miss it. Get ready for it. Be ready. Then let it in.

Thanks be to God.