

## **“Receiving God”**

Genesis 18:1-10a and Luke 10:38-42

*A Sermon Preached by Rev. Katie Owen Aumann on July 17, 2016  
at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Durham, NC*

Tom was running late to church on a Sunday morning. Rushing at the last minute, he parked his car, scurried up the sidewalk, and walked into the back of the sanctuary. The organ prelude music had begun and an usher handed him a bulletin and greeted him kindly. Knowing that his face was not familiar and he was clearly a guest to the congregation, the usher kindly said, “We are so glad that you are here to worship with us this morning. I should warn you. We have a guest preacher this morning so it probably won’t be very good. But we’re glad you’re here and we hope you’ll come back another week as well.” With that the usher opened the door and directed him into the sanctuary. About half way through the service, the pastor began introducing the guest preacher for that morning. “We are so pleased to have the Rev. Dr. Tom Long, esteemed professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology, with us this morning. He has been regarded as one of the top protestant preachers in the United States and it’s an honor to have him as our guest preacher this morning.” As Tom stepped up into the pulpit, the usher, standing at the back of the sanctuary and within eyeshot of the guest preacher, went white as a sheet.<sup>1</sup>

The usher that morning was simply trying to be hospitable, to be welcoming, and to set expectations for this guest. And yet his actions reveal what we don’t want to admit about ourselves. We are really good at making assumptions. We make assumptions about guests—known and unknown—all the time. We assume that they don’t know anything. Or we assume that they know too much. We assume that someone walking into a homeless shelter is poor or uneducated or must’ve really screwed up. We assume that someone whose skin tone appears non-white must be an illegal immigrant. We assume that someone walking into church as a guest doesn’t have as much to offer us as we have to offer him.

And yet, so much of the Biblical narrative hinges on how we treat our neighbor and welcome the stranger that these assumptions can get us into a lot of trouble, because how we receive a guest matters. The Old Testament places imperatives on the importance of welcoming the stranger. The Hebrew word, *ger*, for foreigner, stranger, or alien appears some 92 times in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Torah regularly repeats the refrain, “You shall also love the stranger, for once you were a stranger in Egypt,” a constant reminder that our call to love the stranger and welcome the guest comes from personal and historical experience of being one. Likewise, the imperative for hospitality toward the neighbor extends throughout the New Testament. This whole chapter in Luke’s Gospel is rich with story after story about hospitality. From the seventy being sent out and received as guests in foreign towns to the parable of the Good Samaritan that unpacks who our neighbor is, the Gospel again and again presents us with stories about hospitality. For the lawyer questioning Jesus about who he is to love as his neighbor, Jesus tells the parable of the

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<sup>1</sup> Anecdotal, as told by worship professor at Columbia Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> Soerens, Matthew and Jenny Hwang. “Welcoming the Stranger.” (Intervarsity Press, 2009). 83.

Good Samaritan to explain just how instrumental hospitality is to experiencing and inheriting eternal life.

The call throughout scripture to love the neighbor and welcome the guest seems straightforward enough. We can all get on board with the *idea* of hospitality. But every time we encounter a story about doing so, it's always a bit more complicated than it seems. It turns out that *HOW* we receive a guest—and not just any guest, but God—requires some further consideration.

The question at the heart of Christian hospitality seems to be, “What are we supposed to *do* when God shows up—in the form of a stranger or a guest?” And in today's texts, we encounter multiple characters who understand the importance of hospitality but are trying to figure out *how* it's done. Whether the person at the doorstep is a trio of unknown strangers or literally Jesus, how we respond matters.

If Abraham, Sarah, Mary and Martha were to debrief their encounters with God from today's passages, there are certainly some common features. Both Abraham and Sarah *and* Mary and Martha are trying to faithfully serve and follow God in the best ways they know how. No one is questioning their love of God. And all four desire to follow the commandment to love their neighbor as well. But all four seem to have different approaches. Abraham greets three strangers exuberantly and sees in them the presence of the Lord. And in response, he chooses a fairly lavish display of hospitality—bringing water to wash their feet and preparing not just the cakes he describes but curds and a fatted calf for these honored guests. Sarah, on the other hand, remains invisible to the guests but assists in ensuring they have what they need to be welcomed. Martha invites Jesus into her home and desires to provide a welcome space, frenetically scurrying about to present the best environment for the Lord. Mary, on the other hand, chooses an approach of simple presence, sitting at Jesus' feet and listening. A lavish spread of food, behind-the-scenes preparations, welcome space, simple presence. Same imperative to love your neighbor; four different approaches.

Our natural instinct is to ask: Which one is best? We want a formula, a list, a clear-cut approach for how to be hospitable. We want to know exactly what to do when God shows up. We want to know how to be God's host—in our hearts, in our lives, in our homes.

So, surely the outcomes of these stories will tell us something of which is the right approach. In the Old Testament narrative, Abraham and Sarah are rewarded for their outpouring of hospitality that arguably required a great deal of work. In return for their efforts, these strange guests affirm God's promise that Abraham's offspring would number the stars. Their response to Abraham and Sarah's outpouring of hospitality is the surprising affirmation that Sarah will have a son—so surprising that Sarah laughs. By contrast, in the New Testament narrative, Mary sits around while Martha does all the work and Mary is praised for choosing the better part while Jesus chides Martha for her frenetic, distracted role as hostess. In one story, the outpouring of food, water, and comfort appears to be exactly what God demands of our hospitality; in the other, those same actions appear to be ridiculed.

In our desire for a clear-cut answer to what hosting behavior is best, today's Gospel story from Luke often gets twisted into an oversimplified choice: are you a Mary or a Martha? You're either a thinker or a doer, reflective or productive, about presence or results. And when we simplify the story down into those dichotomous pairs, then our minds immediately assume that one must be better than the other—Jesus said so, after all. Luke's text often gets watered down into a moralistic story about how we're supposed to be more attentive to our spiritual disciplines like Mary. It gets simplified into a story about the contemplative life and a critique on our busy-ness. It's even been used as a twist on modern hospitality that encourages you to be hospitable, just as you are, and gives you permission not to worry so much about cleaning house. That one, I could get behind.

But to say that Mary is better than Martha gets complicated when we read it alongside the story of Abraham, Sarah, and the three heavenly guests. This can't simply be an issue of stopping what we're doing to sit in the presence of God, because when God shows up before Abraham in the form of three strangers, Abraham rushes around as distracted as Martha and receives a blessing and the promise of offspring for it. If this is really just a formulaic story about whether we're to act like Mary or Martha, then my productive, outcomes-based, Martha-like tendencies don't have a lot of room for this text.

But what if? If this is really a story about hospitality, what if we're focusing on the wrong characters? We read these stories and assume that we're supposed to learn something about how to be a host from Martha or Mary or Abraham and Sarah. We assume that the question is: what are we supposed to do to receive God? to welcome God? to be host to God? Here we go with our assumptions again: We assume that the one doing the welcoming is the host and God is the guest. Hosts assume a position of power; guests are to be passive and attentive. But when we believe we have power over God, we should look further.

But what if our focus should be on God's presence in the text? In these two stories, our assumptions about the roles of host and guest get muddled. To be in the presence of God means that while we are receiving God as guests, we also become guests before God, the host, whose divine presence has a great deal to offer us.

When artists try to capture biblical narratives, the focus of a painting, where the characters are placed and where the light shines, tells us whose presence is most important and where our eye should go. In 1411, Andre Rublev painted an icon called the "Hospitality of Abraham" depicting today's Old Testament story for the abbot of the Trinity Monastery in Russia. While it's titled the "Hospitality of Abraham," the icon depicts only the three heavenly visitors—all dining together around a table with a central cup. Abraham and Sarah are nowhere to be found in the painting; instead Rublev realized that the focal character was the Triune God. His piece, which is now regarded as one of the best artistic depictions of the Trinity, depicts the three guests as One Lord. "Each holds a rod in his left hand, symbolizing their equality. Each wears a cloak of blue, the color of divinity. And the face of each is exactly the same, depicting their oneness," as they each are turned toward

the other two.<sup>3</sup> In Rublev's depiction, our lesson in hospitality comes not from how the angelic visitors interact with Abraham and Sarah, but how they interact with one another. The Triune God is not about power over one another but about equally receiving one another and equally giving to one another.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic priest and theological writer, reflects on Rublev's icon in this way:

The more we look at this holy image with the eyes of faith, the more we come to realize that it is painted not as a lovely decoration for a convent church, nor as a helpful explanation of a difficult doctrine, but as a holy place to enter and stay within.

As we place ourselves in front of the icon in prayer, we come to experience a gentle invitation to participate in the intimate conversation that is taking place among the three divine angels and to join *them* around the table...

We come to see with our inner eyes that all engagements in this world can bear fruit only when they take place within this divine circle...the house of perfect love.<sup>4</sup>

If mutual giving and receiving is God's posture in Triune relationship—Father, Son, and Spirit—then it teaches us something of what our posture is to be when we receive God. If our focus in these stories is on God as the main character, then our posture in relationship to God seems to be what matters most. Not demanding, not assuming, not worrying, but attentive; ready to mutually give and receive. "When we participate in 'The Hospitality of Abraham'...we discover that really we are responding to 'The Hospitality of the Trinity.'"<sup>5</sup>

Both of today's biblical stories seem to pivot on the moment when the characters stop and pay attention, when they realize they are in the presence of God. Abraham and Mary both realize that while they are offering something to their guests, their guests also have something to offer them. Jesus, who is really good at turning everything on its head, praises Mary because she's figured out that while Christ may be a guest in Martha's home, to be in his presence is to be welcomed and loved and received as a guest by God. A promise of life comes from both stories—a promise of new life in the form of a child for Abraham and Sarah and a promise of life with Christ for Mary and Martha. But those promises come when they are finally attentive enough to receive them. They are offered sitting at Jesus' feet or standing under the tree while the three angelic guests ate, not from the scurrying to prepare, feed or host with perfection. It comes from the times they realized they were in the presence of God, when guest becomes host.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.soulshpherd.org/2012/08/enjoy-the-hospitality-of-the-trinity-with-rublevs-icon/>

<sup>4</sup> Nouwen, Henri. "Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons," (Ave Maria Press, 2007). 20-22.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.soulshpherd.org/2012/08/enjoy-the-hospitality-of-the-trinity-with-rublevs-icon/>

In less than an hour, 38 Westminster youth and adults will board a bus and head up the mountain to Montreat, one of those places in God's creation that gets described as a thin place, where it's easier to feel God's presence. I don't know whether it's easier to be attentive to the presence of God at Montreat because it's beautiful or because the word of God is proclaimed so powerfully from the stage or because Taylor takes away our cell phones so we have one fewer way to be worried and distracted by many things. But God shows up there in surprising ways.

Two summers ago, I was keynoting for this same youth conference. Every morning I had the fear-inducing pleasure of standing up in front of 1,200 high schoolers for 45 minutes to talk to them about God. The role comes with spotlights and Beyonce microphones and can lead you to believe you're in a position of power. But a few times throughout the week, once the stage lights were off and I was just Katie, I was invited to a youth group's house for lunch or dinner. Mid-way through the first week, I knocked on the door of a youth group's house for lunch. There was a flurry of Martha-style activity happening inside and before long we all went through the line for a nutritious meal of dino nuggets and mac & cheese. It would've been easy to assume that I was supposed to have something witty or insightful to say at their keynoter for the week. But in that moment, as their guest, it wasn't important that I was in a position of power, and it wasn't about a perfect dining experience. As we gathered around the table, one of the leaders said it was their group's ritual to name where they had seen God that day. As the youth started to reflect on where God had shown up for them, I sat there thinking that more than any stage with spotlights and more than any beautiful hike, this scene—mutually gathered around the table where two or three are gathered, listening attentively to one another—was where I could see the presence of God. Just as it was for Abraham and Sarah and Mary and Martha, may we pause long enough at the tables we gather around this week to worry less about perfect Southern hospitality and instead be arrested by the beauty and blessing of dining in the presence of God. Amen.