

The Divine Guest: A Sermon

Genesis 18: 1-14
Colossians 1: 21-29
Luke 10: 38-42



There are two stories of divine hospitality in this morning's readings. The first is the story of the three mysterious visitors to Abraham, one of whom is designated as "The LORD." There is an Orthodox icon of this event where the three visitors are portrayed as angels; the alternate name for the icon is "The Old Testament Trinity," and each one of the three figures of the icon is identified as one of the members of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That the doctrine of the Trinity was on the mind of the author of Genesis is unlikely, but the point is the same. These three visitors are not just ordinary visitors. This is a personal visit from God to Abraham. God is, as it were, Abraham's guest.

The second reading is the gospel reading, and it has a similar structure. Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha, where Martha serves, and Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens. This story also has enjoyed a traditional interpretation in the history of the church. Martha has been perceived as an example of the active life, the life of those who must do physical work for a living; and Mary has been portrayed as the example of the contemplative life, that is, of those religious orders who gave themselves over to prayer and contemplation rather

than to active service. So Christians have managed to find a way to take a biblical story that challenged Martha's one-up-manship of Mary, and turn it into a way where they could identify with Mary to encourage one-up-manship over those whom they identified with Martha.

But I do not think that the story is primarily about Mary and Martha, who are the hosts, but about Jesus, who is the Guest. What is God like when God comes to visit us? This side of the resurrection we know the identity of the Divine Guest. Jesus is not just any visitor to Mary and Martha. He is the Son of God, God come among us as a human being. So, once again, God is, as it were, a Guest. This time, God, the Son of God, is the Guest of Mary and Martha.

Both of these stories have their crucial place in the overall biblical story. In the first, God appears to Abraham to announce that he will give Abraham a son. From the descendants of this son, Isaac, will come the people of Israel. One of these descendants of Isaac will be David, who serves as a type of the ideal King, and one of David's descendants will be the promised Messiah.

In the New Testament, Jesus is proclaimed to be that descendant of David; he is the Messiah, who is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. So, in the Old Testament, we have the story of God appearing as a visitor to Abraham, and promising him a son, through whom salvation will come not just to Israel, but to the whole world. In the New Testament, we have the Divine Guest again, this time as Jesus, who is the fulfillment of the Divine Visitor's promise to Abraham, comes as a Guest to Mary and Martha.

These two stories challenge our expectations about reality. The first challenge is that when God comes among us, he does not come among us as we expect him to. Throughout most of human history, people have had certain kinds of notions of what the gods will be like when they visit humanity—gods like

the Greek Zeus or Babylonian Marduk. If God is going to visit humanity, we expect him to come as the conquering warrior, as the all powerful king. Instead, when God comes to Abraham, when God in Christ comes to Mary and Martha, he comes in a manner that is hidden. Neither Abraham nor Mary and Martha were aware of the divine identity of their guest. In contrast with the pagan gods, the God of the Bible comes to us not as the all powerful despot, but as our secret Guest. We do not necessarily recognize him.

Second, this God of the Bible comes to the most unlikely people. Just like today, people in ancient cultures knew who was important and who was not. The Egyptian rulers were supposed to be descendants of the gods. The Sumerian kings had divine status. In the New Testament period, Caesar was believed to hold commerce with the gods, and the early Christians were persecuted because they would not offer sacrifice to Caesar. God associates with important people. God is not supposed to just show up for dinner at the front door of an unimportant traveler in the Near East like Abraham, a man who has no permanent home, and no land or property to call his own, who has no children to inherit his wealth, and no country. God is not supposed to be the dinner guest of two unmarried sisters in a backwater hick town like Bethany in Judea.

Third, when God arrives for dinner in these stories, he is not even the Proper Guest. A lot of activity takes place when the Divine Visitor arrives in our stories. Abraham and Martha do exactly what we would expect in terms of Middle Eastern hospitality. They go to elaborate lengths to prepare a proper meal. Abraham not only allows his three visitors to rest, but slaughters one of his own cattle to feed them. It is no surprise that Martha complains when her sister Mary does not assist in providing the proper hospitality that would be expected to give to any visitor in that culture.

However, the Divine Visitor has everything backwards. He

refuses to be treated as a Guest, but reverses the roles. He insists on becoming the Host to his hosts, and he treats them as guests. It is not the three visitors who are to receive Abraham's hospitality, but rather, Abraham must receive the divine hospitality by receiving God's promise to give him a son—even in his old age. Abraham's wife Sarah knows this is impossible, and responds to the divine hospitality by laughing. The whole thing is just too absurd. Yet the Divine Visitor keeps his promise. Again, the proper response to Jesus in the story is not that of Martha, who acts as the perfect host, but of Mary, who instead of serving, receives the divine hospitality by sitting at the feet of Jesus. This reversal of normal expectations about hospitality is the point of the story, I think, and not that Martha should have prepared a casserole rather than a three course dinner. When God comes among us to be our visitor, he becomes our Host, and he expects us to be his guests.

This is the very heart of the gospel story. We see a short summary in the epistle reading this morning. Paul writes, "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him." (Col. 1:21) In Philippians, Paul writes that Jesus emptied himself, and took on the form of a servant, humbling himself to the point of death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5-8). Jesus himself said that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) The gospel story is the story of how God has come among us in person, as our Guest, but rather becomes our Servant, so that we might be his guests.

There are a number of ways that people in the Bible respond to God's coming to be our Guest, and most get it wrong. Some, like Abraham and Martha set about getting busy. If the Divine Guest is here, we need to get the place in order. Others like Peter, tried to set Jesus straight. If Jesus was the Messiah,

the Son of David, he had no business talking about being crucified, which, again, reversed the order of hospitality. The Messiah was not supposed to suffer, but to rule. (Mark 8:31-33) Others responded to Jesus' divine hospitality with inhospitality. Throughout the gospels, Jesus encounters opposition, and in the end, those who could not accept the divine hospitality, crucified the Divine Guest.

Finally, some might respond with fear. It is odd that, given the expectations that people had then, and people have now, about what it might mean for God to come among us, few people in the gospels seem to have been afraid of Jesus. Perhaps it is because Jesus is such a gracious visitor that he does not impose his Deity. When God comes among us in Jesus, he does not come the way that people expect him to, so they do not know enough to be afraid. It is only when people suddenly get a glimpse of who this Visitor really might be, that fear sets in. When Jesus performs miracles, when he casts out demons, and when he appears alive again after having been crucified, then people respond with fear. Notice how often Jesus or angels greet people with the expression, "Do not be afraid!" at these moments when the divine presence can no longer be hidden. While all of these responses to the Divine Visitor may be understandable, the gospel makes clear that they are inappropriate responses to the presence of the Divine Guest.

One of my favorite poems is by the seventeenth century Anglican Divine George Herbert. It is entitled "Love," and provides the appropriate response to the Divine Guest who is really our Host. The poem begins,

*LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lack'd anything.
"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here:"*

Love said, "You shall be he."

Like Martha, Herbert realizes that his house is not in order, and a good deal of preparation is needed before he could allow himself to be the Guest of the Divine Host. Herbert complains that he is not a worthy guest, but Divine Love insists that Herbert must be the guest anyway. Herbert is too clever for that, however. He points out that he is an ungrateful guest, and, because he does not appreciate what God has given him, does not even deserve to look on his Host. Herbert says:

*"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on Thee."*

But this Divine Host is not going to be out-witted by the one with the unworthy eyes. Since God is the Creator who gave us our eyes, he can decide what we can look at with them. The poem continues:

*Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"*

(Herbert responds:)

*"Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve."*

That should be the final trump card. God may have made our eyes, but we have ruined them by misusing them. Herbert pleads that he should go where he deserves. But even that does not stop his Host, because the one who invites us to be his guest, is also the one who redeems us from our unworthiness to be that guest. The poem continues:

"And know you not," says Love, "Who bore the blame?"

(Herbert responds:)

"My dear, then I will serve."

It seems that all doors are closing, so Herbert tries one last way out. He will be content to be Martha. He will serve, and Love will be his guest. But, in the end, the Divine Visitor does not allow even this hedge. It is the Divine Lover who insists on being our Host, who will provide for our needs. We are not the hosts; we are the guests. The poem ends:

*"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.*

So, after doing everything he can to get out of it, Herbert finally provides the appropriate response to the presence of our Divine Visitor We must sit and eat. Like Mary, for all of our sins and anxieties and failures, we must be content to be God's guests.

God has come to us in Jesus. Our temptation might be to think we need to get things ready first. "My life is a mess, but let me clean up my act." However, Mary had it right. God has come among us, not as the one who demands to be served, but as the one who gives himself to us. Or rather, Jesus has come to be our Guest, but the surprise is that he has come to be the Host of the banquet. And he offers us the opportunity to be his guest instead. The New Testament writers use the language of grace and redemption and forgiveness of sins to make this point. God has come to us in Christ, but we do not need to get our act together first. He is the Host. We just need to be his guest.

Or we might respond by trying to set Jesus straight, like Peter did. We are quite aware of the mess the world is in, and we have our own solutions. We're fine with Jesus, as long as he can get with the agenda, or, at least, not get in the way

of our agenda. Anyway, we know what is wrong with the world, and, we need to get it fixed. But no, we don't need to fix the world. We need to be the guest of the Divine Host. It is his job to sort out the world and the mess it is in.

Of course, we may not be so naive as to think that we can put God to our purposes that way. Yet we know ourselves, and we know the many ways we fail, and the many things we have done wrong, and we are overwhelmed with guilt. Or perhaps, instead, we respond with fear. What if it really is the case that when God comes among us, he will come as the All Powerful Despot, who comes to condemn and destroy? That kind of divine presence is too much, and we try to get as far away from it as we can. If we can only perceive God as a threat, then he is the one who condemns us. We do not need or want such a Guest. What could God's presence in our lives mean but fear and dread? But Jesus' word to us, as it was when he appeared to his disciples after his resurrection is "Do not be afraid! I have come to be your Host. You must be my guest."

You have been invited to the banquet by Love himself. Sit. Listen. Let him serve. Be his guest.