

In the Presence of the Divine
Sermon Before the Congregational Church of Salisbury
Sunday, July 17, 2016

Good morning. It's good to see you all here this morning.

I want to welcome all who are visiting this church and this area for the summer.

As you know the Rev. Diane is on sabbatical and I have been asked to fill in. We have been given some remarkable scripture we read this morning (thank you Larry!) and it invites further discussion.

In church we deal with the presence of the divine through our studying the Word of God as revealed in scripture and our reactions to it. At communion services, particularly in a Catholic ceremony, we actually call for the divine presence of Jesus.

The writings of the Old and New Testaments were composed in the first place as witness to the experience of God in the world¹. These experiences are known as a hierophanies, a manifestation of the sacred. It is a formation of the Greek words, *hieros* (sacred) and the verb *phainein* (to reveal/to bring to light). Around the world, churches and shrines mark these special and sacred places where man met

¹ *ibid*, pg #7

the divine, or hierophanies occurred. So let's look closely at our readings for this Sunday and see how the characters involved reacted to the presence of divinity.

The first is Abraham's encounter with the three unknown men he sees at a distance from his tent by the oaks of Mamre during the heat of the day. This animates Abraham, sensing something as he runs to greet them and motivate his household, including his wife, Sarah, to welcome them and fix them a mid-day meal.

This is no ordinary encounter; the Oak at Mamre, in Palestine territory, is in Hebron. It is a sacred place with a 5,000 year old tree that sprouted a new root sprout in 1998. It is owned by the Church of Russia that built a church there in 1868 – the Monastery of the Holy Trinity and is a pilgrimage site.

For some Christians, certainly the Russians, this is the place where the Triune God, in the form of the Holy Trinity, first appeared or is mentioned in scripture. I remember this from my Hebrew bible class taught by Michael Cogan, the editor of the *New Oxford's Revised Standard Version of the Bible*. I called Michael to get his take on our scripture lesson and he said, yes this is taken by some Christians as first evidence of our triune divinity, but as the story goes on it turns out it God is with two avenging angels, who are on their way to visit Lot and destroy the city of Sodom. As you may remember they save Lot and his wife, but when she turns back to view the destruction they forbade, she becomes a pillar of salt.

Dr. Cogan also reminded me that in the previous chapter, Abraham had an earlier encounter with God, who charges him "... for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations," on the condition that: "...every male shall be circumcised." As he was 99 years old, and since Sarah was 90, Abraham thought this highly unlikely, but follows the Lord's instructions, none-the-less. Poor Abraham is probably recovering from this minor, though painful, experience when these three unknown new guests appear.

This does not curb Abraham's enthusiasm, nor his humility, as he prepares for them a feast with a fatted calf and milk curds (dairy and meat). This by the way is not kosher, but we must remember that kosher rules were established by Moses later in Jewish history. Abraham cuts no corners to make his guests feel at home and have them well-fed. The three guests inquire where is Sarah? And one of them predicts she will have a son. Sarah laughs to herself and is called out by one of them for it. Accordingly their son, the progenitor of Israel, is to be called Isaac that means "to laugh."

A last note on this encounter is the icon on the front of our bulletin this morning. It is created in the 15th century by a Russian painter, Andrei Rublev. It is his most famous work and one of the most renowned of all Russian icons and art. It depicts three angels sitting at a table. On the table is a cup with the head of a calf. In the background is an oak, Abraham's house and a mountain. The figures of angels are

so arranged so the lines of their bodies form a full circle; one angel blesses the cup while all are in contemplation.

Michael notes that there is also a similar ancient Greek and Roman myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* of Baucis and Philemon. They were an old married couple in ancient Tyana. They were the only ones in their town to welcome the disguised gods Zeus and Hermes (Jupiter and Mercury in Roman mythology) thus embodying the pious exercise of hospitality, The old couple notices their wine pitcher does not empty and realizing their guest are divine, are advised to flee the town to a mountain top and watch its destruction, much like Lot and his wife's story . Baucis and Philemon are granted their request that when one dies the other would die as well and changed into a pair of intertwining trees, one oak and one linden.

Let us turn to our Psalm reading that reminds us that dwelling with God is intrinsically linked to how we live. Entering into God's presence involves a commitment to live in the world the way we live in God's presence. Our hearts and speech become aligned with God's purpose. In sum those who dwell with God learn to abandon trusting their ability to shape and control their lives and the world and instead put their trust in God. Like Abraham, whose life reminds us that to do so is an ongoing and unfinished process, with challenges like the sacrifice of Isaac yet to come.

Hospitality is important in the biblical world in general, but in particular in Luke's Gospel. When Jesus comes to Bethany, Martha demonstrates hospitality in welcoming him into the house she shares with her sister Mary and brother, Lazarus. It was well known to Jesus who performed his penultimate miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead there (John 11: 1-46). As such it is a renowned pilgrimage site on the West Bank located 1.5 miles east of Jerusalem on the south eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives. Also Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem from here on Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1) and he lodged here the following week. This was the site of the home of Simon the Leper where at dinner Mary anointed Jesus (John 12:1-8). It is also the site Jesus was staying before his ascension to heaven (Luke 24:50). Known for these multiple hierophanties, it also has a number of churches commemorating them. Has anyone been there?

But, back to our story...Martha then busies herself with the task of serving their guest (*diakonian*). We are not told what these are, but a good guess is she begins to prepare a meal. Meanwhile her sister Mary sits at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. Rather than assuming the role of a woman in her culture, she assumes the posture of a student learning at the feet of a rabbi, a role traditionally reserved for a man.

The pleasant story takes a sharp turn when Martha, distracted by her many tasks and peeved by her sister, comes to Jesus asking “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me all the work to do by myself? Tell her to help me.”

You might want to cheer Mary for her feminist initiative, defying the customs of the day, or empathize with Martha for being so responsible, but Jesus’ answer is surprising:

“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.”

The problem with Martha is not her serving, but rather she is worried and distracted. The word translated “disturbed” in verse 40 *:periespato*” has the connotation of being pulled or dragged in different directions. Martha’s distraction and worry leave no room for the most important aspect of hospitality – gracious attention to the guest. In fact she breaks all rules of hospitality trying to embarrass her sister in front of her guest to intervene in a family dispute.

Martha’s worry and distraction prevent her from being truly present with Jesus and drives a wedge between them. So Jesus says that Mary has chosen a better path, the one that will not be taken away from her.

In a culture of hectic schedules and the relentless pursuit of productivity, we are tempted to measure our worth by how busy we are, by how much we accomplish, or by how well we meet the expectations of others. Many of us and I include myself in this, identify with Martha – we are pulled in different directions feeling worried and distracted by many things – this seems the common thread of life in our fast paced world.

Yet Jesus says in Luke 12:25 (and the Sermon on the Mount) ‘Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?’ It is true much of our business and distractions stems from our noblest of intentions. But if all our activity leaves us with no time to be still in the Lord’s presence and hear his voice – we are likely to end up anxious and troubled and providing a kind of service that is devoid of love and joy, even resentful of others.

We are not going to be in God’s presence unless we are fully there and our attention is fully committed to Him. Here, I want to commend the group that has established the time for mindfulness before our worship services.

In Luke Timothy Johnson’s (the retiring professor of the New Testament at the Candler School at Emory) latest book: *The Revelatory Body*, he outlines his conviction that “the human body is the preeminent arena for God’s revelation in the world, the medium though which God’s Holy Spirit is most clearly expressed”

Thus it is through ourselves who are made in His image, "... God's self-disclosure in the world is thus(made) continuous and constant".²

We are not in control of these moments when we are blessed with what might be called "grace". Sometimes the Good Lord has to hit us over the head to get that attention. These are tough lessons that come at the most difficult times in our lives, but also turn us around. Let me illustrate with a poem trying to describe an ineffable moment in my life that eventually led me to going to divinity school:

Many Paths

*...that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
Romans 8:26*

Christmas morning, below zero,
the day after she died,
my breath freezing, I am dazed
as I walk into the barnyard,
to recall our happiness with the animals there.
Sagging cedar gates close behind me.

My quarter horse, Cinnamon,
spots me over a hundred yards distant
and begins his long lope. Soon,
his soft nuzzle is rubbing my face, warm,
then her horse and soon, the whole herd,
joined by the goats, and the dog.
They ring me in a circle of compassion.

Touched, yet unbelieving, I look up

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Revelatory Body*, pg. #1

into a blinding, cold sun and feel a release—
an energy courses
the length of my body,
and something unnamable
says again, then again:

There are many paths.

Nothing has ever been so clear.

I sat on that hierophany for about six months and poured a lot of wine over it before talking about it with Dick Tabor on a canoe trip. He suggested I might want to consider going to Divinity School. It changed my life and has led to the interfaith work I do today.

I was privileged recently to attend the Aspen Ideas Festival a couple of weeks ago. One of the most engaging speakers, among the many notables present, was David Brooks, who talked about “The Four Commitments of Life” based off of his recent book *“The Road to Character”*.

In that book he distinguishes between our Resume virtues, the ones we talk about and our Eulogy virtues, or those virtues others hopefully extoll when we pass. His idea for the book came from a book written by his rabbi (Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, *Lonely Man of Faith*, 1965), who noted there are two account of creation in Genesis and argued that these represent the opposing side of our nature. He called them Adam I and Adam II. Adam I is the career-oriented ambitious side

of our nature. (i.e. our resume, who wants to build, create, produce, and discover things) while Adam II is the internal Adam and wants to embody certain moral qualities. Adam I wants to conquer the world while Adam II wants to serve the world.

David says as such we strive throughout our lifetimes for four things (1) material things (2) ego things – status, fame etc. (3) generative things – kids, service, contributions to community, and (4) lastly transience – how do we develop that inner light – what are we doing for our soul? David's book is about Adam II and a group of people who achieved transience.³

I think we are back to Mary and Martha. Martha and most of us may have been working at levels 1 and 2, maybe 3, while Mary was worried about level 4. Brooks goes on to say we work on getting to the transient levels through long term commitments – first to our spouse or loved ones, secondly to our vocation, thirdly through development of our philosophy and beliefs about life and lastly through building our community around us. We must risk commitment to gain anything in the long run.

Brooks' book in fact is about a series of his heroes who over time achieved transience over their lifetimes. Ironically, the class I teach to students at Georgia Tech tries to do much the same thing through studying the literature of these

³David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, pg. 1 & 2

people. Most striking to me was our joint choice of St. Augustine, Dorothy Day and Victor Frankl.

Just as Jesus was telling Mary stick with that that can't be taken away from you, at the end of his book, Brooks shows for these notable people (and ourselves) who commit themselves to ideas and faiths that are nobler than any individual ever could be their victories follow the same arc: from defeat to recognition to redemption The humble path to the beautiful life...

Joy is the byproduct experienced by people who are aiming for something else. But it comes when there is a unity of effort between Adam I and Adam II – when moral nature and external skills are united in one defining effort. Joy comes as a gift when you least expect it. Those moments are blessings and the signs of a beautiful life,⁴ just as the legend of Baucis and Philemon's intertwining trees.

One more poem:

⁴ibid pg. 269 & 270

Doing The Lord's Work

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Matthew 6:26

Four fluffed sparrows greet me
on a rail just above my outside table in Central Park,
their feathers bunched like scarved homeless
scavenging this Boat House.

A cute chirping chorus on this bracing
morning after the opera last night.
They eyeball my toasted bran muffin crumbling
with my ample application of strawberry jam.

The words of my late wife, the opera star, singing
“His Eye is on the Sparrow”
at my uncle’s funeral comes to mind...
but their eyes are on me!

A little groggy and hungry this morning,
I was savoring this roll, bite-by-bite,
but this crew doesn’t take food stamps-
the welfare system is failed.

They cajole me into a direct mission
and I leave them half of my muffin--
it is soon swarmed by fluttering communicants.
I’m doing the Lord’s work.

Go in Peace today my friends and think about what you are doing for your soul...

