

Divine Service

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “Sarah, my love, guess who’s coming for dinner!” These are the words Abraham might have said to his wife if he had known that the Lord was planning to stop by for a visit. Fortunately, for both their sakes, the Lord did not announce his intentions prior to his arrival. I mean think about it: how would you prepare to receive and entertain the Lord God and King of All Creation in your own humble home? What sort of elaborate meal would you plan? What would you serve it on? Paper plates aren’t going to do, you know ... ah, but is the china you received as a wedding gift so many years ago going to be adequate? You know, you’ve chipped and scratched a few pieces over time; maybe you should rush out and buy all new. And how about getting the house in order? Goodness, my wife goes off on a cleaning frenzy if I tell her a repairman is coming to look at something in the parsonage. I shudder to think of the kind of gyrations I’d put her through if I told her God was coming over. Yes, I think it’s a mercy that the Lord didn’t tell Abraham he was going to pay him a visit. He just showed up unexpected one day.

As we heard, Abraham was sitting near the door of his tent in the heat of the day. Envision him in the shade of an awning of some kind. For a tent-dwelling semi-nomad like Abraham it would be like sitting on the front porch taking a little after-lunch nap. Suddenly he awakes from his dozing to see the Lord standing there in human form. He’s accompanied by two others, whom, we discover later in the narrative, are angels. They also are in human form. They stand at a respectful distance. In the ancient world you didn’t just walk up to someone’s tent or home. You waited for an invitation to draw near and come into a family’s personal space.

But as soon as Abraham realizes who’s standing there doing the equivalent of ringing the doorbell, he springs into action. Now, I have to tell you, at times I’ve thought that Abraham didn’t know that it was the Lord himself; that he just thought three strangers were standing there – and a lot of people would agree with that – but the more I’ve thought about it, I’m pretty sure Abraham recognized the Lord immediately. After all, the Lord has by this time appeared to Abraham on several other occasions. And I don’t imagine he used a different disguise every time he showed up. That would be awfully confusing, not to mention uncharacteristic of the Lord. No, it’s reasonable to believe Abraham knew exactly with whom he was dealing. And that helps explain how eager he is to serve his most highly honored guest. Sure, showing immense hospitality was considered a great virtue in that culture; but Abraham really goes all out.

First he leaps up and runs over to greet his guests. You might think that’s not so much, but you need to take into account that Abraham is 99 years old when this happens. Running is something he gave up decades ago. After his short sprint, which no doubt leaves him winded, he bows down low before his unexpected guests and begins to *beg* them to stay for a bit so that he can have the *honor* of serving them a little refreshment. He speaks of what he’s planning to do for them in almost disparaging terms: “I’ll fetch little water for you to wash your feet, and find a morsel of bread for you to nibble on while you rest in the shade.” But then, when they agree to his proposal, he runs to tell Sarah to bake some fresh bread using three seahs of their finest flour, while he himself runs out to the herd to find the best animal he’s got to roast on the fire. And just to give you an idea, three seahs of flour would fill a five gallon bucket to overflowing. That would make an awful lot of bread. And to put whole calf on the spit to serve just three guests ... well, you get the idea: Abraham is going all out – far beyond what could be called excess.

We're not told how Abraham entertained his guests while these lengthy preparations were underway (it would have taken several hours); but it's safe to assume that he did it with the same overflowing hospitality. But then, when the veritable feast they've prepared is ready, Abraham humbly serves it to his three visitors and then stands by like an attentive waiter – not so close as to presume to be part of their holy conversation, but not so far away as to keep him from making sure that their glasses ever come close to being less than full. And to fully appreciate what Abraham is doing, we need to remember also that he is a prince among men, so to speak. We tend to think of Abraham and Sarah as a couple alone as they sojourn in the Promised Land; but the truth is that Abraham is a very wealthy man who either owns as servants or commands the allegiance of at least a thousand people; probably more. Abraham is not used to serving; he is used to being served. But when the Lord comes to him as a guest, he reverses that. He steps down. He becomes a servant. And he engages in what we might call Divine Service: doing whatever he can to serve the Lord.

And we think, of course: how correct of him; how appropriate; how fitting that he should so eagerly wish to please and to serve the Lord. Right?

No. Wrong. Absolutely and categorically incorrect. Abraham has it exactly backwards. And we do too whenever we think of Divine Service as doing what we can to serve and to honor the Lord. Look at today's lesson again. The Lord God has not left the glory and perfection of his heavenly kingdom to come down to this fallen earth and demand anything of his sinful creatures. Quite the contrary, he comes in person to deliver fantastically good news. He's here to announce that the birth of the long promised child through whom the Lord will fulfill all the oaths he made to Abraham is less than a year away. For Abraham and Sarah, whose aching empty arms have so long yearned to hold this miraculous baby, it's the best news ever. It fills their aged hearts with joy – but do they dare believe it?

It was many years ago when the Lord first made that promise. And at the time, poor Sarah, who had never been able to conceive in her young adulthood, was reaching the upper limit of her potentially fertile years. But that was a long time ago now. Whatever hope she had of becoming a mother had long since dried up with her fruitless womb. And this is why it's so important that she herself hear the Word of the Lord regarding the impending fulfillment of this promise. The Lord asks Abraham, "Where is Sarah, your wife?" And Abraham replies, "She's there in the tent" – that is, she can hear what you're saying. Friends, the Lord didn't ask the question because he didn't know where Sarah was. He's the Lord, after all. He knows. He asks the question so that *we will know* that Sarah can hear the Word of the Lord. Why? Because the Word of the Lord is powerful. The Word of the Lord changes things. The Word of the Lord creates: it brings darkness to light, faith to unbelieving hearts, and life to the dead. It's by hearing in her own ears the Lord's powerful Word that the miracle of Sarah's rejuvenation takes place – enabling her to conceive a child in her formerly dead and fruitless womb.

This is what the Lord has come down to do. Not to be served an elaborate meal; but to serve Abraham and Sarah by delivering the message of a miraculous birth, and with the message the power and ability for them to carry it out. The Lord came to speak them to life. And by his speaking, they were enabled to become the parents of the child through whom the Lord fulfilled all his promises to them: to make of them a great nation, to give them the Promised Land, and ultimately to bring the Savior into the world – bring the Savior into the world, not coincidentally, through a virgin who miraculously conceived the Child of promise by hearing the powerful Word of the Lord.

These truths, these priorities, are reiterated into today's brief Gospel lesson. Jesus is in the home of Martha and Mary. Martha is busy trying so hard to please and honor Jesus with her hospitality. Meanwhile Mary sits attentively at the feet of Jesus listening to him teach. That is Martha is trying to serve the Lord and Mary is allowing the Lord to serve her by soaking up his life-giving Word. And it's driving Martha nuts. "How can that good for nothing sister of mine just sit there on her lazy bottom while I'm doing all the work? It's so infuriating." And she's convinced that she's absolutely right. She's certain that she is serving the Lord. What she can't understand is why Jesus doesn't seem to notice what's going on: how wrong it is, how unfair! "Jesus what's wrong with you? Don't you care that I'm the only one serving you? Tell Mary to get up, get in here, and help me!"

"No, Martha; *you* don't understand. Mary has chosen the better part, and it will not be taken from her." Mary knows that the Son of Man came not to be served; but to serve.

And it's important that we not miss the truth of these lessons. It's so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we come here on Sunday mornings to do some kind of great big favor for the Lord, giving him our praises, our worship, and – let's not forget – our offerings. We're here to serve the Lord!

No. Rather the Lord graciously comes here among us when we gather in his name to serve us. He comes to give us his powerful, creative, and restorative Word. He comes to speak us to life in Holy Baptism and when we hear that for Christ's sake, our sins have been forgiven. He comes to give us the body and blood he sacrificed on the cross for us – so that we can live. He comes not to be our guest, but so that we can be his. He comes to hear and to answer our prayers. He comes to give us his Holy Spirit. He comes to teach us and to give us the mind of Christ. He comes to create in us new hearts so that we will see that we don't serve the Lord by doing things for him; but rather by serving our neighbors and attending their needs. This is why we call our worship Divine Service. It's not us serving the Lord; but the Lord – the Divine – serving us.

Therefore let us with Mary always choose the better part, because as Jesus has said, it will not be taken from us – not now, not ever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!