

Living in Expectation

Genesis 18:1-10a

Psalm 15

Colossians 1:15-28

Luke 10:38-42

Alright, let's see a show of hands, how many of us typically identify ourselves with Martha in this story? We are used to hearing Martha get berated for being such a busy worker that she failed to sit with Mary and listen to Jesus teach. But I have a problem with that reading. Nothing in this text indicates Martha's problem was with the work. And this passage falls in the middle of loads of stories where Jesus teaches the value and need for diligent workers in God's kingdom. In fact, our passage in Genesis today seems to laud Abraham for the work he bustled about doing to show hospitality to holy guests of his own. I know I tend to be a bit of a workaholic myself, so it is conceivable that part of me wants to justify that impulse. But the truth is I just don't think Martha's problem was her desire to accomplish the jobs that needed done. According to Jesus, Martha's problem was, not the tasks themselves, but her approach to them. He says she was "worried and distracted by many things". Perhaps Martha would have done best to simply sit down, ignore the comforts and needs of her guests, and listen to Jesus. It's possible, but I think the real problem was not the work at all. The problem was the internal manner from which she performed work.

Now let me ask another question. How many of you have heard of Oak Wilt? I'm sure many of you are far more familiar than I am with this, but Oak Wilt is what happens when majestic, strong, healthy looking oak trees become infected with fungus. The fungus clogs the xylem, which is the mechanism that delivers the tree's water and nutrients.

Eventually, sometimes without ever altering the trees outward appearance, the internal tree rots so completely that the tree suddenly dies, and then seemingly insignificant external pressures like a typical storm can cause the tree to topple. For the sake of

today's message, let us imagine that we are the oak trees, Christ is the xylem, and stress is the Oak Wilt fungus that clogs the movement of Christ's nourishment in our lives.

Our reading from Colossians teaches this idea. Paul describes Jesus as a type of anchor, a steady and strong presence, unaltered by the emotions that wage war within us. Paul explains how messed up our minds were before we came to know Christ; "hostile and estranged". Then he contrasts that with the hope we come to know through faith; "securely established and steadfast". He goes on to explain how his **faith** empowers him to live full of rejoicing, even in the midst of his suffering. This letter was written from prison, and even those afflictions and deprivations were not powerful enough to overcome the joy he experienced because of his recognition of the presence of Christ. Paul says that it is Christ within us that secures our hope of glory. In other words, since Christ lives in us, we are never without the resources of abundant joy, regardless of our circumstances. Hope in Christ gives us access to the mind of Christ which always sees beyond the limitations of human eyes and into the world of limitless possibilities. Paul was not distracted by the worries of his life. For Paul, knowing Jesus, experiencing the power of God at work within himself, gave him the confidence and steadfastness to endure troubles we can only imagine. Not only that, but he did it overflowing with such joy that it infused others, changing the world in his wake. Paul had plenty of reasons for anxiety and distractions, but his recognition of God's presence kept them from clogging God's flow of joy as he worked.

Psalm 15 tells a similar story. It starts off by asking who can dwell with God. We tend to read this as if it's a list of requirements making a person worthy of access to God. But we know no one, no matter how well behaved, is worthy to stand in the presence of God. This is not a list of things we must stress ourselves out to perform perfectly to win God's favor. Rather, this list illustrates the things humans can do to help remind ourselves of the

presence of God and also to make God's presence known to the world around us. This script outlines a blameless way of life, including the words that are chosen to speak and those avoided, and even how money is spent. The final verse says that "he who does these things shall never be overthrown". The word overthrown literally means to be shaken. Living with our hope fixed on Christ, choosing to think, to speak, and to act in ways that keep God's presence foremost in our thoughts, is not something that even "good" people can do perfectly enough to earn God's favor. God's favor comes by grace alone. Rather, it is through an intentional choice to live this way that we position our hearts and bodies to experience the presence of God, and the steadying grace God's Spirit provides. Living this way, through the presence of God, will not create additional anxiety for us. Rather, it is through a life based on these priorities that Christ's grace flows and our anxieties are dispelled.

Both Paul and David seem to have a keen sense of the lesson of Oak Wilt. They teach the importance of keeping Christ central, positioning ourselves to experience the nutrients of God's presence in our hearts, and not allowing fungus to creep in and clog the flow of God's lifegiving nourishment.

And let us not forget Abraham. He was a man lauded for his faith and this text highlights one of the primary reasons why. This passage was written 25 years after he had been promised a son. It was written after he and Sarah tried to help God by providing an heir through Hagar. After he and his household embraced the rite of circumcision. And he was 100 years old. Yet, when the Lord appeared to Abraham, he wasn't weighed down or distracted by his worry. Abraham's openheartedness immediately identified God's presence. Ultimately, it was his ability to recognize and receive God's presence that became his answer to prayer. Who knows what might have happened if anxiety from the waiting had made him miss or ignore the arrival of the holy messengers? But he lived with

the expectation of God's presence, he rushed to honor and embrace it, and a year later the son of promise was born.

I do not believe it was work itself that was Martha's problem. I think Jesus and the disciples had needs that required tending. God has work for all of us to do. The problem is when we allow our tasks to distract us from the one thing that is most important. That one thing is recognizing and honoring the presence of Christ in our midst. All of us can do many wonderful things, but no matter how sacred the work, it can easily be corrupted when we forget Jesus. Martha wasn't **only** anxious about the work she had to do; she was distracted by anger when Mary failed to help her. How often, when doing good and important work, do we allow our anxieties to cause us to perform that work as holy terrors rather than servants, through a sense of joy and peace? How often do we point our fingers at the failures of others, rather than trusting God to both direct them and provide for our concerns?

The work we do in this life has value, but the deeds themselves are not **more** valuable than the manner in which we do them. When we focus on the work itself, forgetting that it is fueled by the power of God, and sanctified by the presence of God, our deeds may make us **appear** as a majestic, strong, healthy looking oak tree. But without the flow of Christ through all our labors, when we are weighed down by anxiety and distraction, we risk becoming like a tree gutted by Oak Wilt, having Christ's flow clogged by unseen fungus that can destroy us from within.

May we be a people whose lives are empowered and stabilized by the presence of Christ, who expect God's presence to appear, who fashion our lives to make us able to identify the Spirit and also do our work in a manner that makes God visible to the world around us.

