Sermon on Proper 11 Year A
(Genesis 18:1-15 Cf. Rom 5:1-8; Matt 9:35-10:8)

Our first reading has a wondrous and puzzling beginning. Three men mysteriously appear outside the family tent; Abraham is under no illusion; these are men, yet according to the first sentence, which functions as a kind of title to the story, here’s a story about what happens when the Lord (Yahweh) appears to Abraham and co. at the Oaks of Mamre.

This kind of ambiguity immediately perks up the ears of the casual Bible browser. What’s going on here; what did the ancient Israelites who first crafted these stories want to convey, we wonder?

Some early Christians saw, in the title verse, and the fact that there is three men, a strong hint of the Trinity, as in Rublev’s famous icon on your bulletin. Our image of the icon is too small but the Oak of Mamre is referenced in the picture

Where is the Lord? Is the Lord the men? Is God working in and through the men as messengers of the Lord and therefore it’s just simpler to call their appearance “the appearing of the Lord?”

If that’s true what does that tell us about the what and the how of the great transcendent God’s Being? Last week, in my conversation with you about the Trinity, I mentioned the categories coined by the great Anglican theologian John MacQuarrie; Primordial being, Expressive being and Unitive Being.

Without repeating my points from last week: this is one of those parts of the overall story where we see that when God expresses the divine life it is biased towards becoming human!

Whatever the case is metaphysically (and that *is*  very important!) the way the story deliberately collapses one category into another: the divine into the human or the human into the divne is a way of helping us anticipate, I think, the main questions the story *itself* wants to ask, with all apologies to Rublev.

These are questions that are constantly at the fore in our lives, at the fore of any group of people that say they are “God’s people;” and that sadly we can forget to deadly effect.

In anticipation, let’s remember that just prior to this story Abraham and Sarah have entered an astounding covenant with God in which God has reaffirmed the promise originally given to them that their descendent pool would be vast; they’re promised that the land of Canaan would belong to these descendants.

God has given them ethical and ethnic obligations, “walk before me and be blameless,” commanding the mark of male circumcision.

But this is a dangerous moment for nowhere in this covenant has God reaffirmed or reminded them of the original reason for all of this: when God had called them from the far country of Ur God had said “I will make you a great nation so that all the families of the earth will be blessed.”

Specialness, your uniqueness, your inclusion in Christ, your gifts, talents and treasure are a great blessing to you, so that you might be a blessing to others!

And the test of whether we understand who and why we are is always the most important and practical of tests: other people!

In this story it’s particularly well put. Will Abraham and Sarah, high on their new-found identity and calling to be “different,” be able to discern the presence of the Lord in the presence of those, paradoxically, “different” from their “differentness?”

Will they recognize God within the human beings around them, especially now that they have received insight into their own status?

More pointedly, will they, will we, be able to recognize the Divine in those not their own, in people different from us?

And, just as importantly, what does it mean to recognize the divine in others?

We soon find out. In a scene we will see repeated in the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke, Abraham runs to meet them! Speaking to them humbly he offers to treat them like honored guests!

In these understated stories details always matter; it’s a hot day; Abraham would not have felt like running, but run he does.

He doesn’t show up their need; instead he understates how hungry and thirsty they must be as a way to uphold their dignity; he speaks humbly about the food he is about to offer when in truth he’s about to offer them a feast!

He doesn’t presume to know their needs but cleverly and diplomatically draws out what they need. This has huge implications! Imagine what would have happened if settler cultures had acted in this way towards Indigenous Peoples!

It’s hard to imagine but drawing on the strengths of both we might live in a culture less consumed with violence, more in tune with Creation, able to listen at a deeper level etc. We don’t know for actions similar to what Abraham does here didn’t happen on a wide-enough scale, in a significant enough way.

To continue, both Abraham and Sarah are quick to organize the feast. Administration matters; doing things behind the scenes without a fuss matters. They are generous to a fault. In short, and here’s the word you’ve been waiting for that defines all of this: they define hospitality!

Authentic hospitality is not trying to look good for others; it’s heart-warming welcome genuinely expressed, practically expressed. It meets people where they are at, it takes into consideration their needs.

Genuine hospitality is something our culture and society like ours desperately needs to see and experience. We all know you’ll get treated well…if you pay for it, but what if you’ve got nothing to offer?

Here we’re getting to the theological nub! The last line of our second reading says “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us;” while we had nothing to offer God, while we were strangers, indiffernt to God’s covenant ways, God not only ran towards us but came to us in Christ, dying for us!

God’s not trying to impress us with this hospitality, trying to put on a show or look good; God is concerned to meet us at our deepest point of need.

To experience God’s hospitality is to begin to live it with and for those around us; *even those we don’t know!* Here Abraham and Sarah get it; they actually pass this test with flying colours!

Would we? Would St. Matthew? Do folks who come to us experience the welcome of the Eucharist? Is there a sense of Holy Mystery that draws them in?

As they offer genuine hospitality they experience the grace and blessing of God; Sarah, astoundingly is promised a child.

We’re not sure if Sarah laughs because she thinks the men are trying to be polite; they notice the lack of children, a great loss in the ancient world; or, if she’s shocked by the promise and recognizes something that is starting to feel awesome and holy; or, if she flat-out doesn’t believe.

I want to be at least as half-way brave and truthful with you this morning as these three men were with Abraham and Sarah: if you will enter into the hospitable communion that is God, everything about your life will be changed; you will even find yourself giving birth to new life to dreams, to ways to help others that would seem prima facie beyond your capacity!

Does that make you laugh inwardly? God doesn’t deny the promise to Sarah because she laughs neither does God deny the promise to us though we doubt!

Genuine hospitality always breeds honesty and dialogue about what is and isn’t possible!

When we live into this sort of vision of God and of what it means to participate in God’s mission then we will not misuse texts like our gospel reading.

The misuse of texts like this has turned the glorious news we have to share into oppression as “Christianized cultures and nations” have sought to “tell other cultures and societies how to live” or, sometimes, even, forcing them to live in certain ways under threat.

We *are* called to preach the gospel, to heal the sick and act as “shepherds” precisely because we are to share freely the hospitality that we’ve received from God!

I ambiguity of the story is pitch perfect! When at this feast we bring our best, our time, our treasure, our talents in service of God’s mission; when we offer hospitality to the newcomer and not just, “oh I hope they’ll stay and add to our numbers,” we find that the title of the story is true: “and the Lord appeared at St. Matthew.”

Then we find that Rublev was right; it is the Triune God who is hospitably inviting us to the feast! Notice in the picture that the circle is only complete as we enter it; there’s a place for the nations, for those we don’t understand, who are as yet strangers to us

Because there’s a space for you!