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Proper 11C

Genesis 18:1-14

Colossians 1:21-29

Luke 10:38-42

When the pressure is on, when you are really feeling anxious, what is it that you do?

Do you eat, or drink, gamble or smoke? Do you turn to another addiction, maybe the television, maybe sports, maybe shopping. Maybe you turn on the internet. That in itself can be an addiction, let alone the addictive nature of many of the sites that are found there. Maybe you work, maybe you exercise, maybe you clean, maybe you yell, maybe you pray. What is it that you do when the pressure is on, when the level of anxiety goes off the high chart?

On my highest functioning days, I am usually able to manage my anxiety by exercising, or just taking some time to write in my journal, pray. Sometimes on my high functioning days, I call a loved one, a friend or colleague. But, of course, I am not always in a high functioning day. On those days, and they can come much too often, I am most likely to eat too much, yell too much, or spend too much.

One of the reasons I ask about your functioning in the midst of anxiety, is that the world we live in is certainly filled with anxiety. Doesn't it seem that the pressures of our day, combined with a 24-7 news cycle, has the anxiety meter almost ready to blow.

Think of your life this past week. What were some of the events that created some anxiety in your life? Perhaps you found out that someone at work or in your family was facing an illness, divorce or some other crisis. Perhaps you had an unexpected bill to pay. Maybe the news of the day raised your anxiety; terrorism, the war, a crime in the city, gas prices, economic news. Maybe you had car trouble, maybe you had guests at home, or the children were gone for a few days. I am willing to bet, that if you look back on your week you will remember more than a couple moments that were highly anxious, and stressful. Doesn't it seem like anxiety and tension are part of the air we breathe?

Our readings this weekend invite us into some anxious scenes. In Genesis Abraham and Sarah are advancing in age, I already know, that's stressful enough. Added on to this is the anxiety in wondering if God would give them the son, the offspring that they were promised. It's a two edged anxiety.one---what if God fails to keep the promise of offspring that God made to them...and two---what if God DOES keep that promise to this very, very old couple. I mean the thought of having a child when one is over 90 years old produces a very unique anxiety. Now there is added tension when Abraham and Sara are visited by three men. Are they friend or foe? Will they bring good or evil? Abraham runs to see, while Sara remains hidden in the tent.

In Luke's Gospel, we peek in on an anxious, worried and distracted scene. A group of guests has descended on the house of Mary and Martha. One of them, Jesus, is rumored by some to be the long awaited Messiah. He is controversial; loved and admired by some, hated and feared by others. There is also tension among the guests. They are nearing Jerusalem and Jesus has predicted that when they reach Jerusalem he will suffer and die. One can almost feel the pressure that was in that room. Martha responds to the tension by distracting herself in busyness.

In each of these scenes, the guests calm the anxiety, lower the anxiety. The tension is not totally eliminated, but by receiving the guests, by engaging them, the promise to Abraham is fulfilled. By listening to and engaging Jesus, the anxiety level in the house of Mary and Martha lowers a bit as well.

On one level, the readings are inviting us to allow God to enter into our tension filled lives and to lower our anxiety.

The Genesis reading proclaims that our God keeps the promises he has made. Not usually in the way or at a time we wish. But God keeps promises. Part of faith and part of hope is remembering this. In love for us God keeps promises made to us. Among those is the divine promise that nothing will be able to separate us from God's love. Nothing in the anxiety producing events of life in our world will separate us from the love of God.

I would also invite you to see that God enters into the life of Abraham, Sara, Martha and Mary disguised as a guest. Abraham did not know that God was present in the three travelers. Mary and Martha did not know that God was present in Jesus. Abraham and Sara, Martha and Mary shared their table with them. By listening to these guests, these visitors, they experienced the presence of God.

The readings are inviting us to allow God to speak to us through the presence of travelers, guests and visitors. This invitation comes both in our home, our neighborhoods, our nation and also in our church. Abraham, Sara, Martha and Mary not only welcomed guests to their table, they also welcomed them into their lives. They listened to what they had to say to them. Do you truly welcome guests and visitors into your life? Do you listen to what they have to say, to what they have to teach you? Do you receive the gifts they bring to your home, and to your life? Sharing a table, a meal with someone is one level of hospitality. But, to allow someone to share their life, to be open to receive the gifts that they bring, to truly be open to the words they speak, that is a much more profound level of hospitality.

What is true in our own life is even truer at the parish level. We have always been a parish who welcomed people. Hospitality is central in our life and vision. On Sunday we invite guests to share Eucharist, our coffee hour. We make it a goal to share the gift of a loaf of bread with them. This is one level of hospitality. A more radical hospitality however, welcomes them into our hearts. A more radical hospitality allows us to listen and learn from our guests on Sunday morning. A more radical hospitality opens us also to those who visit during the week. What do our Sunday visitors bring to us from God? What do our 12 step guests have to teach us about God? How does God come in homeless families that join us the weeks of the Interfaith Hospitality Network? How does God come to us in the other groups who worship here during the week? How does God come to us disguised as the one who comes in need of assistance? Radical Gospel hospitality recognizes that God comes disguised as guest and visitor. Will we listen when God speaks to us through the stranger in our midst?

We most assuredly live in a time of high tension and anxiety. We can seek to relieve this tension by indulging any combination of the addictive habits our culture offers to us.

Or we can open ourselves to the steadfast promises offered us by God. Sometimes, the fulfillment of those promises come in the presence of travelers, guests and visitors. May our table be set and our hearts be open that when God comes to us, we may be open to receive.