

Sermon Prepared by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes for Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2020

(Genesis 18:1-15)

One of my favorite parts of this morning's reading from Genesis is one that I think is often passed over. It's not anything that warranted a single mention in any of the Genesis commentaries I consulted. Yet they are there, and I think they are of vital importance.

"[A]nd he stood by them under the tree while they ate."¹ *And he stood by them under the tree while they ate.* Why, you may be asking, is **this** the phrase that stands out? What's so special about it? My answer is simple. It indicates two things I think we are each called to do: ***pause*** and ***be present***.

Pause and ***be present***.

First, the pause. These 11 words come right on the heels of intense activity, a rush of movement and preparation in the minutes after God literally appears – in the form of three visitors – at the front door of his tent. It is a hot day, much like today, one of those hot days when the pull we feel may often be to avoid activity and simply grab a cold drink and ... well, be lazy. That's where we find Abraham on this particular hot day, a day described in one commentary as one "when the landscape turns hazy and one's vision is blurred."²

But then God appears, and the laziness of the day becomes secondary to Abraham. He greets them. He invites them to stay ... and bathe themselves ... and eat ... and rest. It's then that the motion begins. Abraham already has ***run*** from his tent to greet the three who have appeared before him. Now, he ***hastens*** into the tent to ask Sarah to make three cakes for them to eat. Then he ***runs*** to his herd to select a calf with which to feed them and which his servant ***hastens*** to prepare.

On this hot, hazy, blurry day when inactivity may perhaps be desired, we instead find ***frenzied activity***. In that time, even as now, hospitality was highly valued, and "[n]o exertion, even in behalf of total strangers, is too much where hospitality is concerned."³ The ***heat*** didn't matter; taking care of the visitors ***did***.

It is then that Abraham, after making sure his guests had everything he could possibly need, stepped aside. He took up his spot under a tree near them. He took time to catch his breath.

He ***paused***.

Pauses in life are important things. They may not always come in the ways in which we expect, as we learned with this extended pause that we've been taking in our in-person communal worship and life in the world around us. They may hit us with an impact that's not even expected, as I learned when I attended marches and rallies in support of our black

¹ Genesis 18:8 (NRSV).

² E. A. Speiser. *Genesis*, note 1, p. 129.

³ Speiser, note 2, p. 129.

brothers and sisters in Washington, Winchester and Berryville over the past 10 days and found myself experiencing pauses for prayer and song and silence that affected me on a deeply emotional level. They may even come when we don't want them ... moments when we want to push through and get just one more thing accomplished or just one more project finished and instead find our bodies and minds telling us, "No, let's stop for a while. We need rest."

Pauses are crucial to our health. Pauses are crucial to maintaining some sense of being centered and grounded. Pauses are crucial if we are to hear the voice of God, especially when our own activity and our own voices are blocking out the one above all others that we ***really need to hear.***

Then there's ***presence.*** In those first moments after his guests had been served, Abraham didn't go ***anywhere.*** He didn't ***say*** anything. He didn't ***do*** anything. He was simply ***there,*** exercising perhaps the most important pastoral duty that ***anyone*** – lay or ordained – can do.

Presence works when actions cannot. Presence speaks when words fail. Presence demonstrates love and compassion in a way that perhaps nothing else can. When I was in Washington and Winchester and Berryville in these past days, presence was all I had to offer. I couldn't offer true empathy for those gathered there who are singled out daily for nothing more than the color of their skin. I couldn't say to any of them "I understand" and have my understanding be anything close to the realities of the world that confront many, many of them.

What I could – and can – do was be a visible sign of our Baptismal Covenant. What I could – and can – do is seek and serve Christ in all persons. What I could – and can – do is love my neighbor as I love myself. What I could – and can – do is work for that day when divisions may cease and we all live as one. In doing that on those days – if no other reason than having heard "Thank you for being here, Father!" and seeing people and smile and wave at me over and over and over again – I know that I have done and am doing what needs to be done, simply by being there.

Simply by being ***present.*** And you can, too.

When a family member or friend or loved one is in pain, physical or emotional, our gut instinct may often be to ***do something.*** Friends, we don't have to ***do anything.*** Words may not be called for; action may be inappropriate. But being there ... being ***present*** ... is always sufficient.

Abraham did all he could, and then he stepped to the side. He paused. He breathed. He was present. In moments of stress and separation in our own lives, when all else seems to fail us ... when nothing else seems to be working in our work for others ... may we always remember to do those two things.

Pause and ***be present.***

Amen.