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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Psalm 15, Luke 10:38-42

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I begin this sermon with our Lord's defence of Mary – the sister who quietly sat at his feet and listened to his teaching. Jesus addresses industrious Martha, who seems troubled that her sister is not lending her a hand with the serving. But Jesus defends Mary. The text goes this way:

⁴¹But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; ⁴²one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:41-42, RSV)

So, I have begun, then, with these words about Mary.

But I turn to this morning's Psalm – Psalm 15 – to give us a picture of what Mary is like when she gets up from her sitting and turns to everyday life in this world. That is, let's consider Psalm 15 for its instruction in the *doing* of the Word. For we need both – both the hearing of the Word and the doing thereof. In fact, that is how St. James puts it:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (James 1:22, RSV)

There *is* something deceptive, isn't there, about continual study of God's Word, but with no visible impact on our lives from all the study. No, the study of God's Word is meant to improve us, to make us useful to our Maker and to our neighbors, indeed to lead us into a sanctified life. So, let's take a look at this morning's Psalm for some concrete instruction in a holy life.

Our Psalm starts off with a question, and I think we do well to not dismiss it as somehow a light question. Let us not think of it as a mere rhetorical device to get the discussion started, but rather as a soul-searching question well worth pondering:

¹LORD, who may dwell in your tabernacle?
Who may abide upon your holy hill? (Psalm 15:1, LBW)

“Dwelling” and “abiding” are peaceful images of stability. The thief might sneak into the house, but he does not dwell there, he does not abide there, but gets out as soon as he can. The wolf might enter the sheepfold, but he does not dwell there –

not if the shepherd has anything to say about. And the Good Shepherd certainly does have something to say about it!

So who can dwell in God's presence? Who can abide on his holy hill, in his holy presence? Well, I am pretty sure that the angels can do so. Gabriel, who announced the news of the Christ Child to Mary – he can abide in the divine presence. So can other angels, archangels, seraphim, and cherubim. But *we* are not angels, now are we? Who among us fallible humans can abide in God's presence? Even saintly Moses had to hide in the cleft of the mountain when the LORD passed by. And so the Lord says this to Moses:

...while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; (Exodus 33:22, RSV)

Why this precaution? Because it is dangerous for humanity to look upon God:

...you cannot see my face [says the LORD]; for no one shall see me and live. (Exodus 33:20, NRSV)

Gazing into the sun can blind us. Gazing upon the face of God can blast us away, for we are too much a mixture – too much a concoction of both good and bad. So, who can dwell in God's presence?

There is only one true answer. There is only one human Person worthy of standing before our holy God, and that is Jesus. He became a human being, like you and me, but he did not permit sin to diminish him. He remains human, but also the eternal, beloved Son of God, enjoying fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.

So, if Psalm 15 describes anyone at all, it most perfectly describes Jesus.

But the great thing is that you and I belong to him. That is what baptism means. We belong to Jesus and he to us. And so if we will abide with him, then we can dwell on God's holy hill:

Abide in me, [says Jesus] and I in you. (John 15:4, KJV)

Psalm 15 is useful to us because it teaches us what it looks like to abide in Jesus, so that one day we will abide in the presence of our Triune God through all eternity.

There are three things to note about the one who abides upon the holy hill. There is his blamelessness, his manner of speaking, and his use of money. No doubt, lots more could be said about a righteous person, but Psalm 15 focuses on these three, and so let's try to take them in and to live by them.

First, a righteous person is someone who walks in a certain way: he is blameless, she does what is right. Who can dwell in God's holy presence?

²Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right...
(Psalm 15:2, LBW)

The whole idea of “leading a blameless life” puts me in mind of the preface to the whole Psalter – to Psalm 1 and its discussion of a blessed life:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2, KJV)

The one who would lead a blameless life should walk in the ways of God. The one who would dwell in the presence of God should not exchange that divine presence for the presence of the scornful. Jesus did no sin. If we would abide with him, then we should take delight in the law of the Lord, and earnestly seek to be blameless and to do what is right. When Mary, then, gets up from her listening, she should set herself to do what is right according to the holy law of God. So should you and I.

Second, the one who can dwell in God’s presence is someone who is careful, truthful, and loving in speech. The first point – about being blameless and doing what is right – is expressed with a few words, requiring only one verse. But this second point, about our manner of speech, well, the Psalm lingers some with this and multiplies the words. And so we read that the righteous person:

²...speaks the truth from his heart,
³there is no guile upon his tongue;
he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.
⁵He has sworn to do no wrong
and does not take back his word.

We, who in the beginning were created by words, “Let there be...” can likewise be undone by words. The tongue can slash and burn us, betray and beguile us, humiliate us and demolish our chances in life:

And the tongue is a fire, [laments the apostle] a world of iniquity. (James 3:6, KJV)

But the one who can dwell in God’s holy presence is someone who speaks the truth from the heart, who does not damage or disappoint people through his words, who has sworn to do no wrong and does not take back his word.

If we would prepare ourselves to stand in the presence of God, we should be men and women of truth. We should not say, “Tomorrow, tomorrow, I will do it

tomorrow,” but then forget what we have said. We should not use words to carve out ill-gotten space in life, increasing our freedom but with no firm determination to keep our word. Our word should be iron. When we say we will do something, it should be money in the bank. That is how things flourish. That is how our colleagues and family members can count on us and coordinate their own work with ours.

So when Mary gets up from listening to Jesus, she should go on in life paying even more attention to her words, seeking to be more truthful and gentle in her language.

And the third trait of the one who can dwell in God’s presence is that he or she is careful in the use of money. Those who lend money naturally should share in the profits of the business, and yet we should not permit love of profit to lead us to destroy people’s lives.

⁶He does not give his money in hope of gain [says the Psalm],

To the degree that we have authority in the matter, let us not grind down the poor through financial schemes. Let us not destroy good but struggling businesses and good, but fallible workers by subordinating everything to profit.

And certainly let us not take bribes:

⁶He does not give his money in hope of gain,
nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.

What a perversion of justice, what contempt for a fellow human being, to take a bribe against the innocent. No bribes for us! Jesus never took a bribe. Judas did, but not Jesus. So when Mary gets up from her listening to Jesus, she should resolve to be careful in the use of her money. She should mean to let it be so with her as Jesus says:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: (Matthew 6:20, KJV)

In the end, Mary and Martha need each other. If Martha does not spend some time in prayer and with God’s Word, then she is likely to drift away from Jesus, to not abide with him, and therefore to not abide on God’s holy hill forever. But if Mary fails to get up from her Bible, if the lady is left unchanged by all her study and all her singing of hymns and receiving the sacraments, if she remains only a hearer of the Word and not a doer thereof, then she remains unfinished. There is still good work for her to turn to.

Indeed, that is always the case with us. There still remains good work for us to turn to, that we will abide with Christ and one day abide in God’s holy presence

through eternity, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.