“***Hospitality***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, July 21, 2019

**Amos 8:4–6, 11–12**

4 Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land,

5 saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain;  
and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?

We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,  
and practice deceit with false balances,   
 6 buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. . . .”

11 The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land;   
not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord.

12 They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east;  
they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.

**Genesis 18:1–10**

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. 2He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. 3He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. 4Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. 5Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.” 6And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” 7Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it.8Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

9 They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” 10Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.”

The story of Abraham and Sarah hosting the three visitors has been a source of much speculation. Most interpreters believe the three “men” are really angels, or some kind of heavenly beings. The Eastern Orthodox tradition believes they are the persons of the Trinity, and this has led to a standard icon showing them to be holy, sometimes with haloes.

But to its first readers or hearers, this story highlights the wonderful hospitality that Abraham and Sarah show to these three angelic beings. As soon as Abraham sees the visitors, he comes out of his tent and bows to the ground in respect. He seems to know who these three are, even though the reader does not.

Parallel to Abraham’s hospitality to the angelic visitors is his hospitality to God, his inward openness to God. That’s everything—if you’re open, God will come in, befriend you, and lead you on the never-ending journey.

But it you are closed, if you’re dishonest, or you’re completely unjust to other people, that lack of hospitality will be the death of you. The prophet Amos condemns the injustice that some people are showing to their fellow Israelites: impatient for the holy day to end so they can start making money, cheating by using inaccurate weights in the marketplace, and issuing high-interest loans to poor and overtaxed farmers. Actually, where our text has “buying the poor for silver,” the Hebrew actually says “buying the *helpless* for silver” (Amos 8:6). The heavily taxed small farmers have indeed become helpless under the economic pressure placed on them.

Amos gives the harshest threat possible, when he says there will come a day, not of physical famine, but of *spiritual* famine, when people are unable to catch even an echo of the word of God. Right now, these people aren’t hungry for the word of God. They ignore the prophets, they flout the principles of justice and fairness, but it doesn’t bother them. Someday, they will realize that they need God, but have become incapable of responding to, or hearing God. They will lose the ability to *recognize* the word of God, to know what is true or right, and then they will *really* be in trouble.

Despite the intense and angry rhetoric, Amos is deeply sensitive, and he knows that there can hardly be anything worse than when people lose the ability to think about God or to recognize the truth of God. This is a warning of spiritual death, which is something that can happen to people who persistently do evil or who, through selfishness or laziness, repeatedly ignore moral principle. There are some people walking around, functioning, acting in the world, who are in fact *spiritually dead*. This does not happen after one evil deed, or five. It is a matter of *persistent* and *chosen* evildoing or spiritual indifference, where one has, over the course of time, trained one’s mind to be hateful, dishonest, or coldly indifferent. It is the repeated and *habitual* closing of one’s mind to God and to truth, the hardening of one’s heart from goodness and justice, which leads to spiritual death.

The Psalm speaks of such people when it says, “they close their hearts to pity,” and again, “Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in their hearts; there is no fear of God before their eyes” (Ps 17:10; 36:1). As the Wisdom of Solomon says, “God is witness of their inmost feelings, and a true observer of their hearts . . . . No secret word is without result, and a lying mouth destroys the soul” (Wis 1:6, 11). So dishonesty is spiritually suicidal, and it seems to be at the basis of all kinds of sin. Habitual dishonesty is soul-killing.

This closing of hearts and minds to God is a form of inhospitality. It stands in contrast to the decency and hospitality that Abraham and Sarah showed: a kind of respectfulness that evokes a response. Out of the blue, one of the angels says that Sarah will have a son. This is a promise of the coming birth of Isaac, and of the whole Israelite line. But Amos warns us that some people have closed down their hearts. They have no hospitality for God. It makes me appreciate, all the more, the hospitality Abraham showed to the visitors, which stands for his hospitality toward God. Let us be Abrahams and Sarahs to the angelic forces that come into *our* lives. Let us bow down, and offer our best, and be the kind of people whom Amos could respect.

The British author G. K. Chesterton wrote, “your religion is not the church you belong to, but the cosmos you live inside of” (quoted by R. Rohr, *Universal Christ*, 6). What if the cosmos we lived in were one where we could actually *host God*, could welcome God to come in and sit with us? Imagine *that* cosmos, and it will change the world you live in now. You will start to see God in everything you experience—in other people, in nature, in animals. You will observe the world through new eyes. You could even imagine hosting the Trinity: the noble Father, the friendly Son, the fiery Spirit. Think of their characteristics being with you always, and helping you to see and to experience the world. See through the Jesus lens, or see through the God lens. They are there, sitting in the shade with you, and giving you the values and the virtues that you need, giving you restraint, or courage, or joy, or fire—whatever you need at any given time. You are not alone.