

“Disturbed. Agitated. Frenzied”
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Luke 10:38-42

Now as they went on their way, [Jesus] entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

Have you finished your Christmas shopping? Are all of the gifts wrapped? Are the menus prepared... the groceries purchased... and the cookies baked? Yes? No? Me, neither.

In case we think we are the only ones who have it bad, this is how one mother described her week: “Vince and Emily had colds, Matthew has a fever, and Joseph and Emily got stomach viruses. Luckily, Joseph is all better now, so I’m not the only one standing. ... Hopefully Matthew and Emily will feel well enough to go into the city for some Christmas cheer on Saturday or Sunday.”

I do not know what most of you have been doing or are planning to do this week. But I am guessing that many of you have – at one moment or another – felt like throwing your hands into the air and saying, “Enough!”

I have not watched any of my favorite Christmas specials this year but I think I have watched A Charlie Brown Christmas enough times to recite much of the dialog. Do you recall the scene where Charlie Brown is struggling to take charge of the neighborhood Christmas pageant – they have an innkeeper and his wife, a shepherd, a penguin, a Christmas queen – and everyone is dancing to some great jazz music?

Charlie Brown may not know much about Christmas but he knows this is not it. In desperation, he cries, “Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” His trusted friend, Linus Van Pelt responds, “Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.” He walks to center stage, “Lights...” and then tells the story from Luke’s gospel that we, and nearly every congregation, read on Christmas Eve.

Haven’t we all been this Charlie Brown at one time or another? The world around us seems to be in a flurry. Home can be about the same. We ourselves become so busy or misdirected or overwhelmed by all that is expected of us, that at some point we pause and ask, “Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

Maybe we notice it more at Christmas but this can happen at any time. There are only 168 hours in a week. (And I don’t care if Albert Einstein had the same number of hours; he had help at home!)

We want to love God and we want to love our neighbor as ourselves – through the ways we live our lives – just as Jesus calls us to do. But this takes time. Helping with the Downtown Memory Café takes time. Making prayer shawls or building accessibility ramps outside people’s homes takes time. So does taking all the bags we are going to collect this month over to the Personal Needs Closet, even when it’s only a couple hundred steps away! Doing these things takes time away from other things that need to be done. Sitting down each morning for bible reading and prayers takes time. Joining a small group to attend to your spiritual self takes time. So does coming to church on a Wednesday evening or Sunday morning. This is not just a Christmas thing.

Martha has it right. There are just so many things that need to be done. I mean, really... people expect to eat! The bills must be paid!

And yet, Mary also has it right, as Jesus gently points out to Martha. Mary sits at Jesus’ feet. She wants to hear what he has to say. She wants to learn from him. And she realizes that now is the time to do this.

I have read that when we dream, each person in our dreams represents an aspect of ourselves. To know what our dreams would tell us, we need to understand that all the characters reveal facets of our character.

We need to do this with today’s story of Martha and Mary as well. There can be no either/or if we are truly to be whole. If we act like Mary, we may deprive others of the chance to decide for themselves what they would like to do with their time. We may be cheating them of the opportunity to sit at Jesus feet. When we act like Martha, we deprive ourselves of these same things while also depriving others of the opportunity to do good work. (I’m assuming, here, that I am not the only one who needs to practice delegating.)

Mary and Martha are individuals with different temperaments and ways of doing things, yet they also serve to illustrate where we need to practice balance.

In what ways can you make sure that you sit at the Lord’s feet tomorrow and next week and next year? What will you have to rearrange in your days? What might you need to let go of or delegate? Are you willing to do this? Can you commit?

Maybe some of you need to commit to accepting your inner Martha a bit more often. What tasks are waiting for you to accept them? Who needs for you to share the load a bit more than you have been – today and in the coming year? What times can you dedicate to these duties while still leaving yourself moments to spend with God? Are you willing to do this? Can you commit?

During these four weeks of Advent, hope has been a thread that runs through our messages. Hope that the way we live our lives, while not perfect or even close, is still okay in God’s eyes. Hope that even amid the shadows of wars and rumors of wars, while hunger and homelessness, oppression and violence of too many kinds abound, God is still active in the life of the world and in our own lives.

It could be so easy to succumb to hopelessness. How will we ever get out of debt? How can we manage now that she has this illness? Look what is happening to our savings! How can anything good ever come out of this job... or this election... or this relationship... or this crisis?

We need hope every day. Hope that will enable us to get out of bed in the morning and go about our day. Hope that our loved ones will be all right even with all the challenges they face. Hope that our church will continue in God's service even as fewer people fill our pews and money for ministries dwindles. Hope that we ourselves can do what has to be done and still have energy both for God's call on our lives and for the people and tasks that give us joy.

This is not a hope-filled year or even decade. Terrible things happen everywhere around us, near and far. What will save us from it all? Who will save us?

Our Advent sermon title is, "Why We Need a Savior." We need a savior. Every day, we need something or someone who saves us from despair... who saves us *from* being too focused on any one thing – whether it's working or eating or shopping or relaxing or listening to God or anything else – and saves us *for* the abundant life God would have us live. God loves us so much and God wills for us to enjoy life, to know love, and to celebrate community with others around us.

This is why God sent Christ into the world all those years ago. And this is why we celebrate Christmas every year. Because even if we trust that God loves us – and God does, that's why God sent Christ –even when we trust in God's love, we need to be reminded that the bad things are temporary.

And even as we love God, love our neighbor and love our church, we need to be reminded that, unlike the bad things which are fleeting, hope – God's hope and the hope God offers us – is eternal. God is eternal and God *will* bring some good out of every difficult or impossible situation.

God wills it to be so. And it is. In this, we can find confidence. In this, we find hope.

Amen.