

God wants to get PERSONAL with us. Today's scripture gives us several stories where God engages with Abraham, Martha, and Mary in much the same way he desires to journey with each of us. Let's explore THESE interactions and a story about a deacon's journey into ministry and ask ourselves, how is God actively engaging each of US in our lives today?

The first reading says, "The Lord appeared to Abraham as he sat in the entrance of his tent." At this point, Abraham is 75 years old, a ripe old age by ancient standards, yet, we are told, "When he sees three men standing nearby, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them." He encourages them to stay and he and Sarah, his wife, serve their needs. God's visit comes with a special gift, the miracle of a son in this couple's old age. Abraham was chosen by God, because he is the picture of faith. He is also a witness that we are never too old or too young to get personal with God and his SPECIFIC will for us.

In the gospel reading, Jesus enters a village, and Martha is there to welcome him. At this point in his ministry, he has many followers, so it's likely that the apostles and others have come along with him as well, so Martha, as the main host, has her hands full. We are told she is "burdened with her serving" and she asks Jesus, to tell her sister to GET UP and help her serve the people. This conversation with Martha is like Jesus talking to the woman at the well, He seems to know her. He says, "Martha, Martha you are anxious about many things." Martha and Mary are sisters, they most likely carry the same burdens of the women of that time, serving the visitors who come to their home. Yet, they have very different responses to Jesus coming into their lives. Martha provides hospitality to Jesus, much like she would any other visitor, but Mary is drawn to Jesus and sees this as an opportunity to develop a personal relationship with him. Jesus says, "Mary has chosen the better part," because Mary puts Jesus in the center of her life.

Bishop Barron says, "When Christ is the center of your life unambiguously, all those other concerns tend to fall into harmonious patterns around Him." But, when Christ is not the center of your life, when your life is not anchored in him, you'll be upset by all your many, many concerns and you can become like Martha, anxious and upset."

During my first year in deacon formation, I met with the Director of Ministry to discuss my first-year assignment. The options were hospital, hospice, homeless, and prison ministries. He asked me which I thought would be the most difficult, and I answered right away, "The hospital." After all, the hospital had the most training, and in my mind, the most uncertainty given the thought of visiting complete strangers suffering from all types of medical issues. The director said, "Let's start there." I smiled at first, but then realized he was SERIOUS. A few weeks later, I dutifully started my hospital training.

The online training covered all the procedural rules of working in the hospital and then I met with the hospital Chaplain several times to learn the duties of a spiritual care volunteer. The training was good, but I still felt woefully ill-equipped for this ministry. You could say I was like Martha, burdened with my serving. So, in Martha style, I took matters into my own hands and developed a tool kit, mostly to overcome my own anxiety. It included prayer cards and rosaries that I had purchased, some printed prayers I had found online, my Bible, and some monthly devotional books. This spiritual toolkit was designed to help ME handle ANY situation, by reaching into my zippered binder and pulling out the perfect item.

I did some practice patient visits with the chaplain, and everything went pretty well, then I was on my own. Not feeling especially confident, I found my way to the chapel at Scripps Encinitas, a small room in the center of the lobby with an opaque glass door. It held a maximum of 4 to 5 people, but was usually empty. This is where I learned how to be more like Mary.

I knelt down and put my nervous tension at the feet of Christ, asking the Holy Spirit to help me find the words to say to the suffering people and their families in my assigned rooms. It was then that I gave my burden and anxiety to Jesus and put Him at the center of my ministry. I left the chapel with a lifted heart and headed up to the second floor, zippered binder in hand.

It turns out that almost everyone was interested in visiting with a spiritual care volunteer! Even though I carried my extensive toolkit, I rarely used it. It turns out basic listening skills and Holy Spirit-driven prayers had the most impact with my patients.

I continued the habit of visiting the chapel each Sunday before starting my rounds, and my year at the hospital passed quickly. Eventually, it occurred to me just WHY the director chose to start with my hardest ministry. He wanted to push me into the waters of ministry just far enough that I would realize I needed help, just like we all need help to overcome the burdens of life. The hospital decision led me to ask God for the grace to persevere.

Soren Kierkegaard, a theologian and philosopher from the 19th century, said, "Faith is holding onto uncertainties with passionate conviction." <repeat> The more we ask God to share the burden of our uncertainties through faith, the easier those uncertainties are to manage, as we give God the steering wheel of our lives and let His divine grace drive us in the right direction.

Kierkegaard also said, "It is so hard to believe, because it is so hard to obey." This is where we have to let go of the Martha pattern, of taking matters in our own hands, and turn to the Lord as Abraham and Mary did. Let's think about the times in our lives when we were in over our heads with work, family, relationships, health, or some other burden. How did WE manage? Were we like Marthy, anxious about many things, or more like Mary, choosing the better part. God wants to get personal with us. Let's both welcome Him, as Martha did, but also engage Him through Mary's example of attention and personal encounter.