

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Feasting on God's Presence

Isaiah 25:1-9

Last Sunday, I got a message from my cloud service provider inviting me to take a trip down memory lane. It was one of those emails where their technology retrieves photos from my archives, taken on that same date, years ago. I'm guessing that these photos were from about 16 to 18 years back. The occasion was our fall church picnic. Children and youth were playing ping pong on a table set up in the parking lot. Ken Heinbuch was in the grassy area adjacent to the Jenkins' home, pitching horseshoe. Two rows of tables, extending into what seemed like infinity, were set up along the edge of the parking lot. There was hardly an empty seat as we feasted on an abundance of hamburgers and hotdogs and what seemed like an endless supply of side dishes.

As for the desserts, that was an experience in itself. One photo featured the dessert contest, with a panel of judges comprised of myself, Ronnie Strickland, Bill Proper, Gertie Wood, and Emmajean Jenkins. One and a half decades later, I'm probably still carrying around some of the pounds gained on that sunny fall afternoon.

It helps to remember that all that took place after our Sunday morning worship service. It was just one of countless gatherings where we've concluded our praise then picked up our plates. We've gotten good at making that transition from feeding our faith to feeding our stomachs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we lost a significant part of our life together when we couldn't gather for our fellowship meals. But in recent months, we've begun to renew that practice, and we can testify to how our fellowship is strengthened by coming together at the table. It's one of the ways we experience the joy of the Lord's presence.

So it is in the closing portion of today's text from Isaiah, only on a global and not just local scale. People from all nationalities, races, and ethnic groups will be gathered at a great feast to rejoice in God's deliverance. In this Scripture, the prophet is helping God's people understand what will it look like when God shows up in saving power. It will be like an enormous feast or banquet where those who have had scarcely enough to stay alive will be able to eat their fill.

This image of hope brings to mind the song, "Some of These Days," an African-American spiritual that I was listening to during my devotions earlier this week: "I'm gonna eat at the welcome table / I'm gonna eat at the welcome table some of these days. Hallelujah! ... I'm gonna drink at the crystal fountain / I'm gonna drink at the crystal fountain some of these days. Hallelujah!" You can see how these rhythms and words would uplift, encourage, and give hope to enslaved Africans during their experience of oppression.

What a contrast between the gladness of God's feast at the end of today's text and the scenes of death, devastation, and destruction in the opening verses of our Scripture passage. Towns left in ruins. Cities turned into a heap of rubble. Isaiah says that when God comes to save, those who have perpetrated oppression and ruled unrighteously get overturned and brought down. Rather than endorsing the misdeeds of those in power, God

advocates for those who suffer at their hands. He provides shelter for the vulnerable and watches over the wounded and the traumatized. "You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat" (v. 4a).

During part of this past week's warfare between Israel and Hamas, the United Nations reported that more than 187,000 Gazans have been displaced by the conflict. Many of them were fleeing their homes near the border and moving toward the sea, where a naval blockade awaited. One woman, like so many who had nowhere left to go, captured the desperation when she said, "We had fled to escape from death. We came to find death. If we stayed in our houses, we die. If we go on the streets, we die."¹

In a world where countless individuals and communities feel surrounded by death and destruction, we need to hear again God's promise spoken through Isaiah: "On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all people, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken" (v. 8). That verse, and the hope it provides, is at the heart of why I often use this Scripture passage in funeral services. Paul himself may very well be echoing Isaiah when, in one of his letters to the church in Corinth, he declares that in anticipation of the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead, "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor. 15:54).

In today's text, this defeat and destruction of death itself is coupled with the image of God's feast of salvation. "On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines" (v. 6). Isaiah's declaration is part of a larger biblical witness that includes many images of social enjoyment. Today's reading from Revelation spoke in anticipation of the "wedding supper of the Lamb" (v. 9). At the last supper, Jesus spoke of how he wouldn't drink wine again until the time when he will drink the new wine in the kingdom of God (Mark 14:25). Add to these Jesus' own practice of sharing meals with notorious sinners during his earthly ministry as a sign anticipating the coming reign of God and the heavenly banquet, and you can see how festive meals of abundance are one of the Bible's primary ways of conveying hope. In the midst of this world's sorrows and injustices, the promise of life in the new creation, the world to come, full of celebration and jubilation, enables the sufferers to persevere.

Note that in the feast Isaiah describes, the emphasis isn't just on quantity but also quality. The food that God promises isn't the cheap stuff. No, the Lord will spread his table with "the best of meats and the finest of wines." The poor and the needy won't arrive at God's table only to find skimpy portions of the same things they've had to survive on in this present life. At the celebration of the Lord's deliverance, the hungry will be fed with generous helpings of the best that God's creation can produce.

An AP story once told about Katie Hosking, a young woman in Washington State, who decided to break up with her fiancé just 12 days before their wedding. Katie and her parents had reserved a country club for the reception, at a significant price, with 150 invited guests. Since the club's policy required 60 days notice for any cancellation, the Hoskings were required to pay the full amount.

Turns out they decided to have a party anyway and invited the homeless. Instead of wedding guests, Katie and her parents welcomed residents of the Interfaith Family Shelter to their country club banquet. More than 50 family members and close friends joined 40 homeless people, shelters workers and volunteers for a fun and entertaining evening. There was a DJ, with plenty of good music and dancing. A chef created a menu that included

baron of beef, salmon, shrimp cocktail, fettucine, and fruit. Instead of a wedding cake, everyone enjoyed strawberry shortcake. After everything was done, they packed up the leftover food and sent it back to the shelter, where it was enough to feed the homeless for several more days. Katie, the almost-bride, captured the experience well when she said, "Oh my gosh, we had so much fun."²

"On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples." Keep in mind that during that particular time and culture, economics was less about money and more about exchanging things based on their weight, measure, and number. So in that kind of setting what does abundance look like? "Abundance," according to one commentator, "doesn't look like having a bank account that's full. It looks like a table that's full of the best things."³ This is part of why the feast becomes such a central image for the abundance of God's love and provision, and in this case is essential to the celebration on that day when God's saving purposes will be complete and death itself will be conquered. "The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces." The weeping and wailing that fill this present world, in places like Israel and Gaza, will be replaced by celebration and shouts of gladness in the unending joy of God's presence.

This helps us understand why, in the here and now, in the life of the church, there's an enduring link between our worship and our feasting. Whether we're enjoying potluck in the fellowship hall or hamburgers and hotdogs in the church parking lot, the pew and the table are always connected. The praise on our lips and the food on our plates are both signs and anticipations of the kingdom that's coming through Christ.

Donovan Drake tells about an experience that illustrates the world that God intends and the kind of kingdom he has promised. Drake says:

I remember back when I was a youth minister. One of the parents of our youth had the desire to show the rest of the youth what the real world was like. It was a lesson in world economics. The idea was simple. We would gather the 30-plus youth in the fellowship hall and present to them a feast. But before the kids were allowed to eat, they would be divided into groups representing the size and wealth of the people in the world. Two kids were selected to represent the economically wealthy nations of the world, and those two received one hundred dollars in play money to share between them. It was more than enough money to fill their plates up with anything on the menu: steak and potatoes; hamburgers; fries; dessert; soda. Ten more of the youth were selected to represent the less wealthy of the world, and they were given forty dollars of play money to share amongst themselves. Well, that could still buy some food, but they would have to share and agree what they wanted and then receive smaller portions. The twenty or so who were left—well you guessed it—they would receive only a few dollars and really the only thing that would be affordable and easy for them to buy and divide would be rice!

The parents worked hard setting it all up and presenting the program. They set up all the food; one of the parents sat at the end of the chow line as a cashier at the World Bank. It would show the kids what the real world is like. Make them aware of their blessings.

And so the program got underway. The two from the rich nations got up. "See those two rich people. See how much food they're getting." The next group went up. "Look kids, they're not getting nearly as much. They are going to have to share! Okay now, you who represent the rest of the world. What are you going to do? How are you going to feed yourselves?"

Well, they went through the food line filling up their plates. "Look guys, you can't fill up your plates, and you don't have money for it. Now don't make us make you put back your food! You don't have the money!" And with plates full one by one they came to the cashier handing her a huge wad of bills. What?

What happened was that one of the youth had been tipped off in some way to this great world experiment and had found the play money we would be using for this event on my desk, and he photocopied it and shared it with all who represented the poor in the fellowship hall.

I could have killed him...

Those who were supposed to receive rice were filling their plates, picking up hamburgers and hotdogs, slaw and baked beans. They even bought the white table cloth and the candelabra from those who were sitting at the table set for the rich.

I could have killed him... It was supposed to be a lesson on the real world!

One of the parents shook his head and said, "Just look at this hall."

And I did, and there were all those youth, laughing and smiling and throwing the money in the air, giving and receiving, shaking their fists at the world order. I had to shake my head, too, and smile and laugh.⁴

What was supposed to be a lesson on the real world turned out to be a demonstration of the kind of feasting that God intends, especially for those who've had so little or have been excluded from the table in this present world. For folks like us, who aren't worried about where our next meal will come from, or where we'll sleep tonight, or whether missiles will come raining down on our neighborhood, we need to see through our own abundance and security to recognize our great need for the promises of God and the presence of God, so that we can live lives that are more in keeping with the kind of gathering that God has planned for the faithful in his eternal kingdom.

¹ PBS NewsHour, October 10, 2023.

² *The Wenatchee World* (June 29, 2005).

³ Sermon Brainwave. Working Preacher. October 17, 2017. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/sb563-nineteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-28> (October 12, 2023).

⁴ Donovan Drake, "God's Most Difficult Miracle." Day1. http://day1.org/1089-gods_most_difficult_miracle (accessed April 12, 2012).