

October 15, 2023
Isaiah 25:1-9

Pentecost 20
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“A Foretaste of the Feast to Come”

“This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Of all the meals we enjoyed during our August vacation, perhaps the most memorable was the simplest. We were in a strip mall outside of Buffalo, New York when we noticed that there was a Jersey Mike’s sub shop in the middle of the mall. Jersey Mike’s, as the name implies, has its origins in my home state; it began as a single shop in Point Pleasant, New Jersey, one of the prominent communities on the Jersey Shore. That single shop has grown into a major chain that can now be found in several states; but while the franchises may be far away from New Jersey, they offer a “taste of home” for those of us who remember growing up with these distinctive subs. As soon as Susan and I walked into the store, it was like we were transported back home (Susan grew up outside of Philadelphia, where their “hoagies” bear a striking resemblance to the subs of my childhood). The sights, the smells, the deli meats, and cheeses – everything was a reminder of the delis of my hometown and the Italian subs that we would enjoy. We ordered two subs to go, and when we got back to our hotel room and bit into them it was as if I could hear the ocean surf and smell the salt air of the Jersey Shore. It was as if I had been transported back to the Garden State.

Foods often evoke memories of our childhoods or homes, and meals are often times of remembrance. When we gather for feasts on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and other special occasions, we often share traditional foods of our ethnic heritage that remind us of our families and their traditions. The sights and smells of these family favourites bring back memories of times we shared with loved ones, of places that were an important part of our lives, and traditions that are at the core of our identity. Certain foods not only nourish us; they bring with them memories of cherished times and reminders of what made us the people we are today.

Meals that are times of remembrance are at the heart of celebrations in both the Jewish and Christian faiths. For Jews, the most important meal of the year is the Passover Seder, in which families gather at a special table filled with foods that serve as reminders of the people of Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. The traditions of the Seder are rooted in the biblical commandments that this meal is to be

celebrated annually as a reminder of God remembering God's people and God's act of liberating them for bondage and bringing them home to the land of promise:

- “Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the LORD brought you from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten ... You shall tell your child on that day, “It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.” It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the LORD may be on your lips; for with a strong hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt. You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.’” – Exodus 13:3, 8-10.

On the night of his last supper with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus gathers with them at the Seder table to remember God's liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. As they are eating the traditional foods of remembrance, Jesus takes two items from the Seder table – bread and wine – and institutes a new meal of remembrance, the Lord's Supper:

- “While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” – Matthew 26:26-28.

This last meal with the disciples would become the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which Luther teaches us is “*the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink,*” and that “*the words ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sins’ show us that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.*” (*Small Catechism*). Holy Communion is a sacrament because it is Jesus' command for his followers, it uses common earthly elements, and it conveys the word of promise to all who partake of this holy meal. Whenever we gather at the Lord's Table, we hear these Words of Institution that bring us back to “*the night when he was betrayed,*” remembering our Lord's death and resurrection and the hope that is ours when we are baptized into Christ's act of liberation. The Lord's Supper is a meal of remembrance; each element brings us back to our roots as God's people, whose “*hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness*” (ELW Hymn 597).

But while both the Seder and the Lord's Supper function as meals of remembrance, there is also a forward-looking aspect to each. At each Seder table, the Jewish people declare their hope of "*next year in Jerusalem,*" gathering once again in God's Holy City. In his account of the Last Supper that forms the basis for our Words of Institution, Paul teaches the Corinthians that "*for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" (1 Corinthians 11:26), a reminder of Jesus' promise to his disciples that "*I tell you, I will never drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom*" (Matthew 26:29).

In today's first lesson, the prophet Isaiah offers us a vision of a feast that is to come, a time when God will gather God's people for a festive meal in the presence of the Lord. The language and rituals of celebration follow the proclamation of the Lord's victorious reign (*... for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory.*) – Isaiah 24:23).

- "These verses burst upon the night sky of humanity's exilic existence by reminding the reader of the God who delivers and what that deliverance will mean. Like all texts that bring to bear a vision of the end upon the present, it marks a call to hope against hope ... As we are caught up in the wonder of God, we find ourselves changed." – Dale Coulter.

Isaiah begins with a song of praise and thanksgiving addressed to God, similar to hymns of celebration in the psalter:

- "I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless you, and praise your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable." – Psalm 145:1-3.

Like other hymns, Isaiah's song begins by announcing the singer's intention to praise God, and then consists of praise itself and reasons for praise: "*O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you, I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.*" (25:1). The Lord is honoured, on the one hand, for the destruction of cities and, on the other hand, for providing refuge for the poor and needy. To invoke the name of the Lord is to call to mind the vision of God as the holy one whose holiness breaks forth in justice and righteousness; "*for Isaiah, justice and righteousness are a manifestation of God's holiness, which is refracted through the glory of creation.*" (Coulter). God reveals God's name in the concreteness of history through acts of deliverance, the "*wonderful things*" of which

Moses sang in his song of praise after God's miraculous act of bringing the people of Israel safely through the sea:

- “I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my night, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him ... Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you majestic in holiness, awesome in splendour, doing wonders?” – Exodus 15:1-3, 11.

The passage gains its focus by centering on two cities. The first is an unnamed city that is perhaps a representation of the unbelieving world: “*For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt.*” (25:2). In contrast is the city on and around God's mountain, the place of God's splendour (“*For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain*” – 25:10a); “*the passage celebrates the punishment of the one and the blessing of the other*” (Gene M. Tucker). The prophet celebrates God's goodness in God's acts on behalf of the poor, the needy, and the oppressed:

- “For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat. When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm, the noise of aliens like the heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.” – 25:4-5.

Faced with this demonstration of God's faithful love, even “*strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you*” (25:3).

- “The voice of thanksgiving sees that with the destruction of Babylon and the promise of the restoration of Zion, God is not acting mysteriously or arbitrarily. God is acting as he had promised to act. What is required of the prophet and righteous community was patience and steady vision. Those who trusted in cities of strength might now see the true source of strength, might now fear and revere the God of Israel, the God of the nations.” – Christopher Seitz.

Isaiah follows his hymn of praise for what God has done for his people in the past with a vision of what God will do when God gathers his righteous people on his holy mountain, an announcement of salvation with strong eschatological tones. This is

the fulfillment of the prophet's vision when all nations shall come to this holy mountain to be in the presence of the Lord:

- “In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” – 2:2-3.

This vision of the Lord's salvation includes the provision of a ritual meal on Mount Zion and the bringing of an end to all suffering: “*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.*” (25:6). God shares this meal with “*all peoples,*” signifying reconciliation and communion. The nations come together on Zion for instruction and for the peace established by the Lord; they come together to eat in harmony. As God gathers all people to feast at this banquet of the Lord, Isaiah also prophesies that God will address the deepest human hopes for an end to mourning, to death itself, and to all grief:

- “And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from the earth, for the LORD has spoken.” – 25:7-8.

The new age that the prophet announces will entail a radical transformation, even of the human condition. The prophetic voice declares that life, not death, is what God endorses. Death is understood as any power that threatens life; the affirmation of life, and of God's affirmation of life, entails the end of grief and mourning; “*such declarations come at the table, the banquet at Mount Zion, thus defining the fullness of life as communion.*” (Tucker). The “*shroud that is cast over all peoples, and the sheet that is spread over all the nations*” are symbols of the vast destruction that God has wreaked on nations and peoples that have been enemies of the Lord and of God's people; now God is about to remove these symbols of judgment, for “*in the age that is to come, death will be replaced with life, sorrow with joy, as at the feast of unimaginable proportions.*” (Seitz).

- “Humanity feasts at the table of the Lord because the Lord has swallowed up death itself. In the final analysis, it is not Israel or even the nations that are

the enemy. It is death that must be defeated ... Israel's view of God does not come from abstraction but from God's concrete actions of deliverance. God becomes the God of all because God enters into death and absorbs it." – Coulter.

Because "God's people" is now inclusive of all nations, all are invited to join the prophet in his song of praise: "*It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*" (25:9). God is praised for keeping the promises, for carrying out the plans formed in the beginning. On the day of deliverance, the faithful will "*be glad and rejoice in his salvation,*" echoing the words of the psalmist who proclaims that "*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.*" (Psalm 9:1-2).

- "In the song, the people affirm that God is theirs, that they have waited in the expectation that he would save them, and they rejoice in that salvation. Full homage and honour are accorded to God alone." – Tucker.

As God's faithful people who gather to worship and praise the Lord, we are called to partake of the Lord's Supper which reminds us of all that our Lord has given us "*through his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death*" (*Small Catechism*). We obediently observe the Sacrament of Holy Communion in obedience to Christ's command that we "*do this in remembrance of me,*" and when we come to receive this Holy Meal we are reminded that this is "*the Body of Christ, given for you; the Blood of Christ, shed for you,*" words that, "*when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, forgiveness of sin.*" (Luther). As we gather to receive this meal that reminds us of what our Lord has done for us in the past, we also pray that God will "*grace our table with your presence and give us a foretaste of the feast to come*" (ELW Hymn 182). Holy Communion is a meal that looks both backwards and forwards; it reminds us of the Last Supper before our Lord gave his life "*for us and for our salvation,*" and it looks ahead to that day when Jesus will fulfill his promise that "*if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*" (John 14:3). Holy Communion invites us to look ahead to that day when we will be gathered together at the table of the Lord, where we will feast on the goodness of God's steadfast love, where "*the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces*" (25:8), and where we will live in the sure

and certain knowledge that *“death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.”* (Revelation 21:4).

- “Since in the Lord’s Supper we look forward to Christ’s coming again and to the eternal feasting we will enjoy in his presence, the frequent celebration of the Eucharist gives us a foretaste of that joy.” – Marva Dawn.

Special meals do more than satisfy our physical hunger; they invoke memories of our past and aspects of our heritage and traditions that are at the center of our identity. In the Lord’s Supper, we are reminded of our identity as children of God, as those who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and of the living hope that is ours as the holy ones of God. As we partake of the body and blood of Christ, we are also invited to look ahead to that day when we will be gathered at the heavenly banquet where we will feast on the goodness of the Lord. As we partake of the Lord’s Supper, may we continue to pray that God will indeed *“grace our table with your presence and give us a foretaste of the feast to come.”*

Amen.