

Isaiah 25:6-9 Pastor Bill Uetrict 11/1/09 All Saints' Day

If you were to rummage through the top drawer of the file cabinet in my office—the drawer that contains all of the written copies of my sermons—you would discover that seldom in my years of sermonizing have I preached on the subject of life beyond death. Some might argue that this is due to my age or my good health. And there may be some truth to that. But honestly, the major reason I have not preached on the subject lies in the reality that the Bible doesn't deal with it very much. Unlike some Christians, much of the Bible is not overly enamored with what happens after we die. And it certainly is not enamored with this subject in the way that much of American Christianity is, a way that focuses so much on the individual and the individual's soul.

I think it is time for my silence on death and the next life to come to an end. There is a lot going on around this community of faith that drives my passion to preach on this subject. We need to hear a word on it. And besides, All Saints' Day is a good day for such reflection. And moreover, all of our readings for today force us to do that reflection. Interestingly enough, when much of the Bible—especially that which we experience today—deals with this subject it does so not primarily in a way that focuses on what some call “life after death,” but rather what we could call “the end,” the “final future” as I like to name it.

Isaiah describes the end of all time when he says, “On this mountain (Mt. Zion), the Lord of hosts (God depicted as a leader of a great battalion of troops), will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.” The end here is described as a banquet, a massive party that God is throwing for the whole world. God is the

cosmic host, and all the nations are being fed with the best food and drink. The end is not so much a private tea for your private soul, but a massive banquet to which all of the nations come.

Revelation, too, focuses on the end, the final future: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” Note here that the end is described not as one without the earth, but one with a **new** earth. The earth is not met with destruction as some portions of Christianity seem bent on anticipating. No, in the end there is a **new** earth and a new heaven. Life as we know it is not obliterated, but finds fulfillment. What is so good and right about life is not destroyed. Rather we are given a new earth.

But there is something missing in this new reality. What makes life so hard, miserable, is gone. All tears are wiped from all faces. Mourning, crying, and pain are no more. The sea is no more. Chaos is gone. All of these things are missing because God will destroy the “shroud that is cast over all people, the sheet that is spread over all the nations.” The thing that normally swallows up people will now become the swallowee. God swallows death forever. Death will be no more, Revelation says. The stuff that death brings will be no more. This wet blanket that rests heavily on every human party, every human gathering—this dark cloud that rains on every human parade, that prevents every experience of human ecstasy from becoming all that it could be—this killjoy will be no more.

No more crying there. No more dying there. God’s people are united not only with each other but with God, and life is what it ought to be. That’s the end that God intends for God’s world. You see, he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending. He speaks the

final word, and, amazingly enough, it is the word that he spoke at the beginning. Love brought the world into being. Love brings it to its appropriate conclusion.

In my library sits a book with the title, **In the End, God . . .** The author of this book, John Robinson, gets it. What do we say about the end? God! So many people want us to say more. They want us to describe the end in much more detail. Will there be gold streets? Will Fido be there? Will the neighbors who think differently than I do be there? What do we say about the end? In the end, God—the God who brought it all into being, the God who out of sheer grace gave it all, the God who out of sheer grace will bring it all to a life-filled conclusion. What more do we need to know? In the end, God.

You and I anticipate that end in a small, but powerful way as we hear John's story about Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Today's story begins with Mary in great grief, and, I would add, anger: "[Jesus], if you had been here, my brother would not have died." One of the things that cannot be said about Christianity's view of life beyond death, or the end, is that it does not take seriously the pain that this life brings. I experience many Christians these days who so want to skate over the frigid reality of death. "Oh, I don't know why we are crying; she's in a better place. Oh, she's just going from life to life." That kind of talk may make some people feel better, but it is not the Christian view. Death is real. The pain that it causes is real. All of the emotions that it evokes are real. Mary and Martha are angry. They are deeply sad. Their best friend is gone. Their means for economic security is gone. Life stinks sometimes. Our trust in the God who speaks the final word is not some Pollyannaish denial of reality. If Jesus can be greatly

disturbed in spirit (angry at death), we can be angry, too. If Jesus can weep over the loss of a friend, we can weep, too.

Yet note that the weeping and the anger do not speak the final word in this story. Jesus cries out to the dead man, “Lazarus, come out!” And the truly dead man is resuscitated back to life. Wrapped in the signs of death, Lazarus emerges from the tomb. Jesus is so connected to the author of life that he is able even to raise the dead. And as Lazarus is brought forth we anticipate what eventually will happen to Jesus. In a few short chapters in John God will raise Jesus.

In the end, God. In the end, resurrection. In the end, life. This is what we teach about life beyond death. God will raise the dead. God will raise real people and real bodies. What does that look like? Will bodies come out of tombs? Will our ashes being reshaped into bodies? Which wife will I connect to? Oh hush! This is an image, an image that is meant to evoke trust—trust in the God of creation, the God who always brings life out of death. The future belongs to the God of resurrection and hope. Now therefore, relax! Let go! Trust the world; trust your life and death to the one who will speak the final word! In the end, God!