

Isaiah 25:1-9 Pastor Bill Uetrict 17 Pentecost 10/09/11

Sometimes this preaching gig can be a bit of a challenge, especially when the preacher gets the kind of text that we experience today in Matthew—a text in which an enraged king sends troops to kill a group of people because they killed the king’s messengers who were inviting them to a party; a text in which a man who was dragged into the king’s party is cast into outer darkness and weeps and gnashes his teeth because he is not dressed appropriately for the party. I mean, this is way over the top, a style that the gospel writer Matthew seems particularly adept at. Many of us preachers breathe a sigh of relief when we no longer have to deal with Matthew and his exaggerated, bizarre tales. In about two months, that sigh of relief will be breathed.

Sometimes when confronted with these kinds of texts I definitely wonder what to do with them. And so I check my files to see what I did with them in the past. Interestingly enough, except for one sermon in which I referenced Matthew’s bizarre story, I haven’t preached on Matthew’s wildness. I have preached, however, on the latter part of the text from Isaiah. And actually I have preached on Isaiah’s description of the end of time in terms of a banquet on Mt. Zion many times. It’s one of my favorite texts and images. God is said to be preparing for all nations a great party with the best food and drink. He is said at this party to do away with the thing that ruins every party—death and the grief it brings. This is such a powerful image, such an image of hope. It such a clear image that leads to such clear preaching.

But I have never preached on the first part of the Isaiah text, verses that when you look at them in the context of what surrounds them seem to be out of place. Actually, some scholars believe that this is precisely what has happened here. The latter part of the reading—

the part that talks about the great party—would naturally follow what precedes the first part of the reading. Maybe the editor of Isaiah just misplaced this first part when he put together his book.

The first part, like the second part, is happy. It's a song of praise that exalts God: "O Lord, you are my God; I exalt you. I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things." This song tells us what the wonderful things are. God, it is said, eliminated one of Israel's enemies. God turned one of their cities into a heap. The place where their enemies, aliens (foreigners) lived is no more. This place will never be rebuilt. Hooray for God! God is a refuge for the poor, a refuge to the needy, a shelter from the rainstorm, a shade from the heat.

Now when I read that I was struck by how different that image is from the one we have when Isaiah paints the picture of the final future in terms of a party. And the difference was particularly poignant to me when I read the verse that says, "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for *all* peoples a feast of rich food." Well, I want to know—is that feast for the enemy that you just destroyed, God? That enemy was a foreign nation. And Isaiah says that you are making a feast for all nations. Help me out here!

I don't know, but maybe Isaiah is saying something here by pairing these two very different texts together. Maybe this first part is not misplaced. Maybe life in God is complex. Maybe real life brings together what appear to be opposites. Maybe life is about living within tension.

There are so many experiences of tension in this Isaiah text. The destruction of the enemy is a past event, while the party with the best wine and food is a promise for the future. The strong folks experience fear in relationship to God while the poor and the needy find refuge in

him. A city is destroyed in the first part, while a mountain with amazing richness is recreated in the second part. And as I referenced before, the palace of foreigners received the finality of judgment while God promises ultimate blessing for **all** people.

Tension within the text. Our tendency is to want to do away with tension. For many of us, religion is about getting rid of the tension, giving us clarity. We come to the church, some of us say, because we want to know what to do, we want to figure life out. We want life and especially life in God to be one or the other. What if it is both/and? What if true life, life in God, is not that which takes us away from tension, but invites us into it?

You know as well as I do that one of the great struggles for human beings lies in discerning who is in and who is out. In religious life, the conservatives have placed their money on the truth that tends to be more exclusive. The “in” folks are the folks who believe like we do. The problem with this approach is that a whole lot of folks then are left out. It becomes mostly us who are “in.” While this perspective certainly remains, and sometimes stubbornly so, it has lost some of its power in many portions of our culture. In many corners of our society, the more liberal perspective which centers on inclusivity has become much more popular. Many of us don’t feel that we have the right to exclude. The exaggerated form of this perspective has led some to believe that everything and everybody is okay.

What if both the conservatives and the liberals are wrong? What if, conservatives, “The Lord of hosts will make for **all** peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines?” What if, liberals, some things need to go, some things aren’t okay? What if some things need to become a heap, need to become like a city that has been destroyed?

What if the strong need to be put in check? Not all behavior is acceptable. Can we live a life in which there is a remarkable openness, a remarkable welcome to people and situations of all kinds, while recognizing that not everything is okay, that not everything can be welcomed?

I am struck by the tension we experience in our Psalm for today—Psalm 23, almost everybody’s favorite psalm, a psalm that makes us feel comforted and shepherded, especially as it is presented to us in Marty Haugen’s tune that we sang today. We can be so shepherded and comforted through this psalm that we fail to capture the tension within it: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters. [He] prepares a table before me . . . *in the presence of my enemies.*”

Life is fundamentally about God’s provision, God’s graciousness. And God is lavish in his provision. He is throwing a party for me. Soup’s on for me! But the banquet occurs in the presence of my enemies. I suppose that can make me feel good. La, de, da—they have to watch me eat all this good stuff. Got them back! But still these enemies exist. They remain. Couldn’t we just have a party without all the troublemakers around? Couldn’t life just be an experience in which we all just get along? Does life’s goodness always have to be accompanied by challenge? Isn’t this real life? Isn’t this what life is truly like? Isn’t real life a matter of the tension between marvelous provision and irritating and sometimes overwhelming challenge?

The focus of the parable told in Matthew today is a great wedding banquet thrown by the king. Once again, life is about the great provision of God. God is busy throwing a party. It’s a lavish party—the best food, the best drink. It’s a party to which everyone is invited. Life

fundamentally is about God's grace. Life is all about God's overwhelming love. This is the first word. This is the most important word. But don't think for any minute that this means that there are no expectations for you. Don't think for any moment that you don't live in the tension of extravagant grace and high expectation. *God* is throwing a party, for heaven's sake. So show up for it! What good is the party if you don't come to it? And when you get there, join the party! Put your wedding garments on and join the dance. What good is the party to you if you sit on the side and pout? What good is a dance if you hang out on the edge, complaining about everybody and everything while you are doing so, refusing to dance? Get out on the floor! God's doing the dancing. Now join God!

Life in God (Matthew calls it the kingdom of heaven) is not an escape from tension. In many ways, it is an invitation into it. Life in God is not always clear. Nor is it always easy. Sometimes life in God brings us to the place where we must hold in tension two very different realities. Yes, all are welcome, but not everything is. Yes, God prepares a great banquet for us, but that banquet is not without its struggles and challenges. Yes, life is all about the free gift of God, all about God's grace, but grace isn't easy or without expectation.

Life in God is life lived in tension. If you don't believe that, glance at the cross of Christ. Glance at the coming together of the vertical and horizontal beams. There we see the heart of God, a heart that doesn't run from the tension, but enters it fully. The tough place where we live—the place of tension—is the place where God lives. And if God lives there, did you think that we might find ourselves someplace else?