

SCRIPTURE READING: Isaiah 25:1, 4-9

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. 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 heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled. On this mountain the LORD of hosts 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. 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 for ever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. 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.

SERMON: "Swallowed Up and Wiped Away" The Rev. Brent Damrow

Beginnings matter – they are moments of anticipation; they are times in our lives where we come more fully alive. I am overjoyed about new beginnings that are being realized through two different studies that are launching. 21 different people have agreed to come together for this next year to read Scripture, to study, to learn about God and one another. And at such beginnings there is such joy in the air, isn't there? At the heart of Bible study, in my perspective, is the idea that we have a chance in Scripture to focus on who is this God we follow. Scripture reveals to us the ideas of those who have gone before, and put them in context of our own experience who this amazing God is. It also has the chance to reveal great depths about the human condition – who we are as people, and what it is to live as people in this world as people of faith.

One of the studies that's launching this week is a study on covenant. Covenant means a holy promise, and in most cases, Biblically, we speak of the covenant between God and people, a commitment of depth and purpose and meaning and consequence. In Psalm 106 this morning, we get that glimpse of just who this God is, the kind of God that makes a covenant with flawed people. A kind of God who honors that covenant even when we might not. The kind of God who listens and hears our stress and distress. The kind of God who comes to deliver us time and time again. A God who is faithful. A God who is merciful. And a God who is just, not as we define it, but as God desires it. A God who holds fast and true, leading us from death into life, whether we deserve it or not.

Friends, I know this. God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good. Indeed! In fact, we remember that in the kids' time this morning, there were dozens of ways that the Israelites fell short on this journey to the Promised Land. If you've never read Psalm 106, take a peek at it. Because it goes on and on and on and on. And yet in the end is that assurance that I think we all need to hear, which is that indeed God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good.

The other study is a Disciples study, going from the beginning of the Bible in Genesis to the end of it in Revelation. It is the fourth time I will be teaching this study, and I love it. Invariably, though, about five weeks from now, after we have cleared Creation and Exodus, once we are in

Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Numbers maybe, is that people start struggling in this Bible study. It happens every time. And unfortunately, for a very wrong and flawed reason. People start talking about this “Old Testament” God, this God of power and might, this God that is in our Isaiah reading today, the one depicted as a warrior, the one depicted as the ruler of the cosmos, the one for whom power is at his command. A judgment God, maybe, even.

And yet, we remember the both/and of our Bible. For Isaiah proclaimed that kind of powerful God often. But Isaiah also in the Bible spoke God’s own words, the three most tender words that we can express in our language or any language. The three words simply that say I love you. I will be with you in the midst of those raging rivers, in the midst of those fiery infernos. I will be with you, God says in Isaiah, because I love you.

I don’t think it’s any mistake that Jesus loved the prophet Isaiah so much. He quoted him all the time. If you hear Jesus talking about the prophet, chances are he is talking about Isaiah. And I think one of the things that drew Jesus to Isaiah is this both/and nature. Because if you remember how Jesus thought of God, well, all we have to do is remember what Jesus called God – Abba. A term that connotes an endearing sense of Papa, a beloved gentle one. Abba, Jesus called him. And remember, it is the Old Testament God that Jesus would refer to time and time again when Jesus talked about the fulfillment of commandments simply being in love – love of God and love of neighbor. Remember that Jesus would turn to God, not just in the big moments, but that Jesus would go up on the mountain to pray in those moments before the big moments, or in the midst of a crisis. Jesus knew that that all-powerful, cosmic God was just waiting there for him.

Walter Brueggemann, UCC Biblical scholar and theologian, asserts that when we talk about this passage of Isaiah, that it is indeed a passage about God’s cosmic power, or about God overcoming the most powerful of empires. And yet, if we look more closely at this passage, what I am struck with on this day is: Oh my, what tenderness we see revealed in this God, and how this God offers salvation. “I will wipe away your tears.” A profoundly intimate gesture. The most tender times that I engage with my son Jake are when he is sobbing about something that is beyond his control, and the ability to reach up with my thumb and simply wipe away that tear. It is those moments for spouses, like Patty and Russ, like Roger and Jean, facing the end of life and all those powers that seem to swirl so mightily against them, when the intimacy of wiping away a tear is an amazing gift of grace. Wiping away a tear doesn’t solve the problem. It doesn’t. But it offers connection, and maybe gets at the deeper root of the problem, the fact that what we all need most is that connection of love and relationship. That idea of being bound together, of being profoundly intimate. It is in these times where the whole world seems to be falling apart, where political divisions are growing, where Covid is spreading, where darkness is descending, where coldness is approaching. Where the tears that we shed, what they need, not that that all magically goes away, and it won’t, no matter how the election goes, or no matter when a vaccine comes. But rather the wiping away of a tear reminds us that we are indeed in this together. That we are all grieving loss, yes, as Isaiah points out, the absolute loss of death. But yes, also this word “death” in Isaiah means anything that diminishes, anything in life that diminishes. For I know that I have grieved my mom, my step-mother Jean, many times already, and I will continue to do so. Many tears have been shed and they will continue to be shed. And I know that they will be wiped away, both by those I love and by God, too.

I know that when we pray that we have learned over time to bow our heads, and there is something good and holy in that, there's something centering and peaceful about that. I also offer to you that if you are grieving, if you are mourning, if you are beyond yourself, try praying with your head up and your hands out. Try praying with your head up so that God can look down at your tear-streaked faces and wipe away those tears, remembering that God is there. Isaiah's God, Jesus's God. Isaiah knew God not to be one who fixes everything and solves everything down to the minutiae, but God who fixes the most important things and solves the most important things by never ever forsaking us. And always and forever walking with us, and offering us a path to follow likewise. So when you pray, pray with your face up in this week to come.

And if that isn't enough to bring you comfort on this day, there is that second image. In my clergy lectionary group, two of the pastors indicated that this image, this image of the mountaintop spread with a feast, where people are feasting, and God instead is swallowing up death, is their favorite image of God in all the Bible. When they want to think about who God is and why God matters in the fullness of the human condition, they go here. And who can blame them? This is a passage often so beautifully used for funerals. And yet it is equally perfect if not even better for living. God swallows death. What an image, of God literally taking that which is outside and bringing it to the inside of God. Not just that God experiences and knows it, but what a way to protect the rest of us from the touch of death. Instead replacing it with the touch of a thumb on our cheeks.

While God is there swallowing up death, God spreads before us this amazing feast. And if you look at the words in this passage, what I love about is this is no thrown together casual feast. All these things take great time and preparation, take great attention to detail, and great maturation. They imply that we will be settled, that we will be there, that we will enjoy aged wines, we will enjoy marrow of animals that have grown up and have offered themselves. We will be there to enjoy a feast, and we will be able to linger and stay.

I want you to think for a moment about the most amazing feast that you have ever had. The one that came to me this morning in the midst of my own mourning and grief was a meal in Italy with my beloved Jon, at the Villa Paggia. We were almost the only people in the restaurant. The food was delightful. I ordered this steak that came with this amazing sauce full of rosemary, and I spent time – Jon still makes fun of it – taking that sauce and ladling it teaspoon by teaspoon on each individual piece before eating it. It was a night of such slowness, a night where nothing else interfered, a night of simply being in peace, beauty, and delight – a night of goodness.

I know this, that Isaiah, like so many of the prophets of his time, always pronounced the goodness of God, that we might take up our own role, that we might act justly. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly. In Isaiah's book there is always the call that we should do something, that when we live right and well then amazing things happen. But friends, this week and right now in this moment, stay with this passage. Because if you heard what happens at the end, it simply says "wait." Don't do anything.

Instead, wait for God. Wait for God in prayer with your eyes up and tears running down your face. Wait for God as you enjoy your meal, that feast that has been laid out for you while God swallows death. Wait for God. Do nothing. And on this Sabbath day, let God come to you. And I promise you, you will be amazed.

Here's what I pray on this day, that the Old Testament God, the God of cosmic power, the God of abiding tenderness, and the God of everlasting mercy, be with you in the midst of your own worry and stress, your own grieving and loss, in the midst of the fullness of this life and even the life to come, may God wipe your tears and set your table. And may you find joy and hope in it. Amen.