



A Taste of Paradise
Isaiah 25:1-9
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All Saints' Day

Isaiah's vision of a rich feast, and Paul's memory of a simple meal. We need them both, I think, on this All Saints' Day. The more tables the better, on a day like today.

Sitting around one of those tables for some time now is St. Teresa of Avila, canonized by the Catholic Church. She is well known for her writings, and was even named (after her death) a Doctor of the Church. Read her words and you will discover prayers that are heartfelt and insights that are poignant. My favorite story about her, however, is told not in her own voice but in the journal of a companion. They were traveling to Grenada to establish a convent when they encountered a wide river, one that had risen well beyond its bank because of recent rain. It was impossible to travel further by carriage, and so they continued on foot. Teresa slipped, however, and was nearly carried away by the rushing water. After finally reaching the other side, she told her friend that she saw the Lord looking down on her as he saved her from a terrible death. And then, she said, they had a conversation. "Lord," she said, "when will you stop placing obstacles in our path?" "Do not complain," the Lord said in return. "This is how I treat my friends." "If this is how you treat your

friends," St. Teresa replied back, "perhaps that explains why you have so few!"

To be a saint in the Catholic church is an honor reserved for a very select number — those to whom miracles are attributed and veneration is directed. To be a saint in our Reformed tradition, however, is simply to be a person of faith, as normal as you or me.

Which is why I can say with certainty that joining St. Teresa around one of those heavenly tables is another Doctor, the Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon. Dr. Cannon was my professor — and Rebecca's — at Union Presbyterian Seminary. She was the first African American woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church. I have told you about her before, but I haven't told you this story. When talking with us one day about the ethical implications of calling someone an enemy, she said, "Look. Jesus tells us that in his Father's house there are many rooms. Many rooms. All kinds of rooms. And this is good news, because I have a list of people I want to be right down the hall from me, and I have another list of people I hope will be placed on any floor but mine."

Dr. Cannon, who died just over a year ago, always spoke the truth. She never worried

about acting too holy or sounding too pious, which is probably why her faith was as honest and clear as any I've ever encountered. After laughing with us about her hopes for the seating chart of heaven, she became suddenly serious, and somehow managed to look every one of us in the eye at the same time. "We like to think of heaven as being with everyone we love," she said. "And that's okay. But I am convinced that heaven is more than that. I am convinced that heaven is not about being with everyone you love. It's having the ability to love everyone you're with."

I like to imagine that St. Teresa and Dr. Cannon have enjoyed more than a few good meals together by now.

All Saints' Day. It is a bittersweet day, in many ways, isn't it? A day when we give thanks for so many precious lives. And a day when we are faced with how much we still feel their loss.

The prophet Isaiah was no stranger to bittersweet days himself. A bit of historical background for you:

Rebecca read from Isaiah 25. Chapters 24-27 are considered to be a separate unit from the rest of the book, often referred to as Isaiah's Apocalypse. In other words, it's the prophet's telling of a time when it seems like the world was ending. It begins this way: "The Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. The city will be broken down, every house shut up so that no one can enter. The earth will be fully broken, the earth torn asunder and violently shaken. It will fall and it will not rise again." Now, almost all scholars agree that Isaiah is talking about the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in the year 586 BCE. A time when the world as they knew it was ending.

I can't help but notice, though, especially on this day, how the prophet's words so vividly articulate the heartbreak of grief. Forget for a moment — for just a moment — that he's talking about a city. Those of you that have walked through the valley of the shadow of death with someone — when that journey comes to its inevitable conclusion, doesn't your whole world feel desolate? Doesn't it seem like life itself is utterly broken, torn and shaken?

Whether he's talking about the end of the world as a whole people know it, or the end of the world as any one of us knows it, Isaiah's words capture us because we know — you know — what it feels like to have a lump stuck in your throat, to have your heart sink into your stomach. Isaiah knows the grief you have experienced.

Isaiah also knows that for people of faith, food is so often at the center of our stories. And like we said last week, when scripture talks about food, it's about nutrition, but it's never just about nutrition, which is why Isaiah reports that it is not just the city that is reduced to ruins, but the wine cellar, too: "The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the timbrel is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased."

But then, in the middle of all of this — seemingly out of nowhere — the prophet says, in chapter 25, in today's reading: "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." It's a menu so extravagant it's not enough to tell us once — it's so good it bears repeating. And after we're told what the people will eat, Isaiah takes it one step further: he tells us what God will eat, because when people of faith gather at a table, God has a habit of showing up, too. And at this feast? The people

will fill themselves with mouthfuls of rich food, and glasses of well-aged wines — and God will swallow up death forever. That's exactly the way scripture reads. Even in the most desperate of times, God sets the table with delicacies of every sort, ensures our every need is met, and then proceeds to devour death.

My friend Taylor comes from a good Southern family, the kind where almost everyone has two first names and every supper takes at least two hours.

A good number of years back, before Taylor herself had been brought into being, her parents were preparing for a cross-country road trip. They were driving from Princeton, New Jersey, all the way to California. The car was packed, the gas tank was full, and goodbyes were underway when Taylor's grandmother, Mrs. Lewis, came out of the house with one more box. She had spent much of the night in the kitchen, preparing provisions for the journey. "Now look here," she said, and she pulled out a loaf of homemade bread. After the bread came some pimento cheese, "so you can make some sandwiches," she said. After the cheese came fruit, after the fruit came potato chips, after the potato chips came a whole jug of fresh-brewed iced tea. After the tea came some fried green tomatoes, "so you won't forget what home tastes like," she said. Taylor's mother looked at her mother, already a little homesick, and tried to say thank you (or so the story goes), when Mrs. Lewis said, "Wait! Here's the big thing!" and pulled out an entire 13 pound chicken, cut up and fried.

I have heard this story a number of times, and never once has it included a single detail about how much of that chicken actually got eaten, or about how much grease ended up on the steering wheel, or about how many chicken bones were thrown out the window of a moving

car. The story's finale always — always -- the unveiling of the extravagant meal, and the exclamation that accompanied it "Here's the big thing!"

"Here's the big thing!" On All Saints' Day, I hope with all my heart that we remember the heavenly banquet God promised our loved ones, and promises us one day, as well, where the table is piled high with everything a person could ever hunger for. But I also hope we remember even more that the feast is possible only because God has swallowed up death forever.

1 John tells us that we love because God loved first. Isaiah tells us that we will feast because God feasted first.

And so of course, when it comes time to tell his disciples the really important things, Jesus gathers them around a table. The menu is simple this time around — shared bread and a common cup. This is my body, he says, and this is my blood. I have come so that you may have life, and have life abundant. I do not give to you as the world gives.

"Here's the big thing!" The big thing — the really big thing — the word both Isaiah and Paul use — is salvation. To be saved is to be rescued. To be saved is to know that nothing will ever get the best of you. Nothing will ever be able to beat you. To be saved is to trust that God is stronger than anything the world throws our way. It is to trust that when God takes hold of us, God never lets go, not in life and not in death.

One of my favorite poems is by Joy Harjo. It's titled *Perhaps the World Ends Here*, and I cannot help but hear echoes of Isaiah in her words:

The world begins at a table.

No matter what, we must eat to live.

*The gifts of earth are brought and prepared,
set on the table.
So it has been since creation,
and so it will go on.*

*We chase chickens or dogs away from it.
Babies teethe at the corners.
They scrape their knees under it.*

*It is here that children are given instruction on
what it means to be human.
We make men at it.
We make women.*

*At the table, we tell stories, recall enemies, and
encounter the ghosts of lovers.*

*Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put
their arms around us...
They laugh with us at our poor falling-down
selves as we put ourselves back together at
the table.*

*This table has been a house in the rain,
an umbrella in the sun.*

*Wars have begun and ended at this table.
It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror.
A place to celebrate the terrible victory.*

*We have given birth on this table, and have
prepared our parents for burial here.*

*At this table, we sing with joy, with sorrow.
We pray of suffering and remorse.
We give thanks.*

*Perhaps the world will end at the table,
while we are laughing and crying,
eating of the last sweet bite.*

So when you come to this table later today? Remember: we feast because God feasted first. Which means that all of the names, all of loved ones we hold so dear, they will be right there with us. When you take that bite of bread and swallow that sip from the cup, trust this: it is everything we need for today, and, at the very same time, it is but an appetizer of what is still to come.