***GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER: YOU!***

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Texts: Isaiah 25:6-9 and Matthew 26:26-29

Over the past ten weeks of this summer sermon series, we have visited a host of tables where God’s people have gathered across the years to eat, drink and be merry or mournful or even mischievous. At these tables there have been scandalous deceptions, teachable moments, surprising miracles and divine encounters. We who gather around the Lord’s Table each week find that meals are and have been a central part of the life of God’s people across the ages – a place where God is at work and a place where God’s work is remembered in holy meals from the Seder to the Lord’s Supper. At the tables we have visited thus far the focus was on the present and what happened there – Jacob stealing Esaus’ birthright, the feeding of the 5000, the anointing of Jesus’ feet – or the focus was on the past, breaking bread in remembrance of Jesus or recalling the things he said. But the meals that are the focus of today’s readings are about neither the past nor the present; they look to the future. Our faith treasures the past and lives in the present, but our faith also holds hope for the future, for the future is in God’s hands!

In the prophecy from Isaiah we hear the description of a heavenly banquet: “a feast of rich food and well-aged wines”, a feast celebrated without any tears or fears, a feast shared with great joy and thanksgiving as the result of God’s saving action! For people living in exile, the promise of such a feast was a dream for the future that sustained them in the present. Isaiah’s prophecies are full of such hopeful promises for the people of Israel who faced the grim specter of Babylonian exile. Isaiah spoke of a *new thing* God would do to bring peace, prosperity, and a return home to people who had long suffered in a foreign land. Isaiah spoke of springs of water in barren deserts, and the wolf lying down with the lamb, and swords being beaten into plowshares. Isaiah spoke of new heavens and a new earth, of change that was cosmic in scope for people who needed more than the tweaking of the exilic routine of their day to day lives. He spoke in hope-filled images that foretold change in the lives of people who struggled to find a reason to keep on keeping on, folks who needed help and hope in order to persevere, people who needed something to look forward to. Among the hope-filled images of which Isaiah speaks is this fantastic feast on the mountain of the Lord, a feast “with rich food and well-aged wines.”

There are millions of refugees in tent camps across the world who long for such a promise to hold onto, refugees driven from their homes by horrific violence or genocide or war who now live in vast desert camps where survival is the best the day has to offer. They cook what little they have over open fires, wait for UN trucks to deliver something to eat, and don’t know what or when their next meal will be. Today there are also refugees from Hurricane Harvey who sleep in sports arenas, church basements and elementary school gyms because their homes and all their worldly possessions are under water, those for whom the past week has been a nightmare and the future is a complete unknown. Put yourself in their soggy sandals and hear that promise of Isaiah – the Lord will make for you a feast of rich food and well-aged wines, a feast at which you can eat your fill of cake and ice cream, a feast at which the anxieties of the present will be a distant memory. This is no soup kitchen supper to which you are invited; it is a feast to end all feasts, a feast at which you will eat, drink and be merry yet again! What hope might such a rosy promise offer to them?

As some of you may remember, a few years ago a power surge caused a fire at our house on Taylor Street that left us homeless for several months; one of Karen’s students described us as *hobos*. The day after the fire we met at the house with a contractor who had significant experience with cleaning up such disasters; there was no power, the basement was a charred mess, the smell of smoke was thick in the air throughout the house, and water from the fire hoses was still pooled on the basement floor. As we stood in the hallway trying to take in all that had happened and all that lay ahead, the contractor told us, “You will find this hard to believe, but when we are done your house will be better than it was before the fire.” He was right – we did find that hard to believe – but it proved true: the house is now better than it was before the fire, and the promise he offered gave us something to hold onto that day – hope!

In his book *United*, Cory Booker suggests that “hope is the active conviction that despair will never have the last word.”[[1]](#endnote-1) That *active conviction* is at the heart of our faith; it is active because it inspires us to live boldly now. We dare to hope in a God for whom all things are possible, a God who works miracles, a God who promises to exiled Israelites a rich feast shared in peace back in their own land, a God who promises to Texas flood victims and Syrian refugees and all who despair:

YOU ARE NOT ALONE! I, THE LORD YOUR GOD, AM WITH YOU!

THE DAY WILL COME WHEN YOU WILL AGAIN REJOICE AND BE GLAD! UNTIL THEN, HANG IN THERE! DO NOT DESPAIR!

DARE TO LIVE TODAY! DARE TO LOVE TODAY! DARE TO HOPE TODAY!

It is that good news that Isaiah brought to Israel in exile, and it is that good news we bear to the world twenty-five centuries later. It is the promise of fountains of clear water for those who thirst, a feast for those who hunger, a home for the homeless, justice for the oppressed, life in the face of death, hope amid all despair. It is a promise for the future that sustains us in the present, for it is the promise of God who loves us without end, and nothing – no hurricane or white supremacist or terrorist or enemy or plague, not even death – can separate us from that love of God!

In his book *Love Wins*, Rob Bell writes: “What you believe about the future shapes, informs, and determines how you live now.”[[2]](#endnote-2) A wise woman by the name of Virginia Jones who lived in the projects of Newark, NJ put it this way:

*The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you. If all you see are problems, darkness, and despair, then that is all there is ever going to be. But if you are one of those stubborn people who every time you open your eyes you see hope, you see opportunity, possibility, you see love or the face of God, then you can be someone who helps me.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

We are those who dare to see such hope, such opportunity, such possibility of silver linings in the midst of storm clouds, for the story of faith to which we cling is a story of God bringing good out of bad, blessing out of disaster, hope out of despair, life out of death. It is that hope that encourages us, prods us, inspires us to live today, to go and serve today, to help others now in order that the world can be a little more the way God wants it to be.

Every time we gather at this table, we make that bold, hope-filled affirmation about the future. We recall Jesus sitting with his disciples on the night of his arrest; we break bread and share a cup in remembrance of him, but we also look forward to that day when we will all sit at table together in the Kingdom of God, that day when death will be no more, and pain will be no more, and despair will be no more, and love and light will flood our lives. As we heard in Matthew’s account of that Last Supper, Jesus interpreted that holy meal for the disciples gathered with him in words we still repeat – in the bread, his body; in the cup, his blood poured out for the forgiveness of sins. But then he tells them, “I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.”

In those words there is the hint of his death but also the promise of his resurrection! It is the promise that in the Kingdom of God there will come a day when all will sit together at table with the risen Christ and share a heavenly feast. It is an image of abundance, an image of reconciliation, an image of heaven, an image of hope that empowers us to live toward its promise today even though the world is wracked by scarcity in some corners, flood waters in Texas and Bangladesh, violence in Syria and Charlottesville, even though the world seems far from being the way God wants it to be. We dare to hope for a better day to come, for our hope is in the Lord our God, the one who promises to Israel a feast of rich food and well-aged wines, the one who loves us without end, the one who invites us to this table, saying: Take and eat and drink and hope – and live!! Amen

1. Cory Booker, *United*, Ballantine Books: New York, 2016, p.57 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, HarperOne: New York, 2011, p.46 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Cory Booker, *United*, Ballantine Books: New York, 2016, p.39 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)