

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
The 20th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A: October 15, 2023

Isaiah 25:1-9

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 made the city a heap,
the fortified city a ruin;
the palace of aliens is a city no more,
it will never be rebuilt.
Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
cities of ruthless nations will fear you.
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-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged 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 forever.
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.

Feasting and Rejoicing in the Lord, Always

As a preacher, when God gives me the grace to do so, I am often aware of how many strands come together for at least one hour, on Sunday morning, every week. There is so much that is here this morning because you are here, because we are here, because God is here. Just the reality of all of these strands intersecting this morning into the very heart of God and God's church makes me humble and grateful.

For example, on the surface today we have the culmination of our Stewardship efforts with our Ingathering Sunday: the blessing of our pledges and United Thank Offerings. This is hugely important to our life together as a Church. We have important work to do in blessing these gifts if we are to carry on our ministry and our life together at St. John in the Wilderness. That is one reason we are here today.

And also, like every Sunday, here with us is our own deep brokenness. The struggles of our lives which are so real and can be so heavy. At times, we are overwhelmed by the weight we carry. How can we go on with so much loss, without the people who have always gotten us through? What if my health doesn't return? What if our loved ones continue to struggle? How can we find time to take care of ourselves when we are caring for children or grandchildren, spouses or parents? Or sometimes it's "Am I allowed to be grateful or content when so many are still hurting?" As we should, we bring our lives here, before God, to be offered and blessed on this altar.

And, like every week, we also feel the weight of the world with us as we gather. How are we to find stability in a culture that is changing so quickly? What do we do when we don't recognize the country we grew up in? And especially these days our hearts break for people around the world where warfare and violence is raging. Our hearts continue to break for Israel and Palestine where violence is out of control. Innocent people, children, were terrorized and killed there. Just last week in Sunday School we discussed this cycle which is all too familiar and all too suffocating: our sin and brokenness leads to violence which leads to vengeance which leads to death which leads to more brokenness and more violence and more vengeance and more death. How do we possibly escape this cycle?

All of that is here this morning with us because we are here. And frankly, that's why I come to Church, that is why I pray, that is why I need a life dependent upon God's grace in community with other Christians.

Because also here today we find God. We find God present in all of this. We find God's abundance and God's hope and even God's Good News. We find Christ in us and around us – God enfleshed – as the one who binds all of these strands together. Two out of our four

Scriptures readings this morning are ones that we often hear at funerals which is incredibly Good News for us because funerals are Easter occasions when the altar is festive and bright, when the paschal candle is lighted, when “Alleluia! Christ is risen” is heard in the wailing and tears.

In Isaiah, most of all, we are invited to God’s promised banquet, to keep the feast. This is actually a reading option for Easter Sunday!

*On this mountain, 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.*

*And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples...
He will swallow up death forever.*

*The Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces,
And the disgrace of his people will be taken away.*

My friends, when we come for Church today, I know that so many burdens and joys are present with us and God meets us, gathers us together, and prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. The Lord anoints us with oil and our cup overflows.

God’s response to everything going on in our lives and in our world is to invite us to table with God and with each other. That is why we are here. We are here to share in the Kingdom banquet with Christ as the host. We are here to celebrate God’s goodness, God’s abundance. This is why today is not merely about money or even about having a little bit of fun with each other. Today is about living into the feast which God has invited us to and through which we experience a foretaste of the fullness of God’s goodness that is changing us here and now.

Your generosity – God’s ongoing work in your lives to give away what it makes more sense to hoard – is a visual and tangible experience of God’s love and hope. You are making possible our life together as a Church. You’re giving is a refusal to buy into the lies of scarcity that pull at us constantly. It’s a faithful and sometimes daunting step of trust into God’s loving arms but that is exactly what we are here to do – not just with our money but with our entire lives.

We are gathered to celebrate God’s faithfulness. We are gathered to Feast at God’s table. We are gathered to rejoice in the Lord always, as we heard in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul wrote those words from prison. He wrote those words while literally in chains. “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Again I will say ‘Rejoice.’ Let your gentleness be known to everyone: The Lord is near.”

Thank you for gathering to feast today. Thank you for sharing so much in so many different ways so we can keep the feast as Christ's Church. Thank you for rejoicing in the Lord always. Even with all of the challenges of our lives and our world, today we are compelled to celebrate and feast and offer thanks. Today we must rejoice for the Lord is surely near.