

All Saints; November 3, 2024
Isaiah 25:6-9
Death Swallowed Up

**On this mountain
the LORD of Armies will prepare for all peoples
a banquet of rich food
a banquet of aged wines,
with the best cuts of meat,
and with the finest wines.**

**On this mountain
He will destroy the shroud that covers all peoples,
the burial cloth stretched over all nations.
He has swallowed up death forever!
The LORD God will wipe away the tears from every face.
He will take away the shame of his people throughout the earth.
For the LORD has spoken.**

**On that day it will be said,
“Look, here is our God!
We waited for him, and he saved us!
This is the LORD!
We waited for him.
Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!”**

What is the number one most important issue for you? Many people say, “Inflation.” They say, “Immigration.” They say, “Democracy.” They’re all wrong. So wrong. I’m waiting for some unsuspecting pollster to ask me that question. You want to know my number one issue? It’s getting old and sick and dying. As soon as a candidate has a policy to fix that, I’ll vote for that guy. I’ll vote for him, and then I’ll go sit on a chair and live. Death. That’s my number one most important issue.

But of course, no one ever answers the pollster that way. That’s not one of the choices. Because death can’t be fixed, right? After the Fall, the Lord told Adam he was dust, and to dust he would return. And so Adam did not get around it. Neither did Moses, David, or Isaiah, who wrote these words. Peter, John, Paul: all died. They are dust, you are dust, I am dust. And to dust we shall return.

Isaiah compares it to a covering, a thick veil, a heavy blanket, an atmosphere hanging over the whole earth. We breathe it in and out. It’s around us, until it’s on us. It’s suffocating. This is as far as our own vision takes us. But God gives Isaiah a vision of something else: a mountain, a feast, death destroyed, tears wiped away.

God sees. He sees what death has done, what it’s doing to us, what it will do to us. God hears. He hears our groaning, our prayers for mercy and relief. And God acts. He acts to redeem us from our sin and its wages of death. And he does more. He prepares a table for us – for you and me.

When the Scriptures speak of the end of all things, the fulfillment of all desire, the joy that awaits us, it is not just about the end of death. It’s also about the feast of triumph waiting for us, and for all the saints.

It happens on a mountain. On this mountain
the LORD of Armies will prepare for all peoples
a banquet of rich food
a banquet of aged wines,
with the best cuts of meat,
and with the finest wines.

A meal served in the presence of the Lord God, where we dine with our God face to face. It reminds the Bible reader of a scene in Exodus chapter 24. Moses has just led God's people out of Egypt, the land on bondage. They've gathered at a mountain called Sinai and received the Lord's commands. Then Moses and 72 elders climb the mountain. **They saw the God of Israel. There under his feet was a pavement of sapphire, clear like heaven. And he did not lay his hands on the elders of Israel. They saw God, and they ate and drank.** They were alive and feasted in the presence of God, a foretaste of what was to come for all God's people. That is what the saints in heaven have, and what we look forward to. This is the victory we thank God for today: the veil of death no longer hanging over us, the veil shredded on the mountain.

Instead of walking back thirteen centuries from Isaiah to Moses, we could also think forward seven centuries to another mountain slope where Jesus gathered with five thousand hungry men. Before he fed them with bread, he fed them with the Word: **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, for they shall be satisfied."** And then Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it to his disciples to feed all those people. And there was a dozen baskets left over. They all ate and were satisfied on that mountain, too.

And we think forward just a couple years from that mountain to one other. This mountain the Lord himself climbed, alone, his only company Roman soldiers and a man named Simon with a cross on his back. It didn't look like he was headed to a feast, or that any triumph was ahead of him. It looked like death would wrap itself over him, as it wraps itself over all, and suffocate him too. And during the middle of the day, from noon to three, the sun went out. Darkness covered the earth, the veil of death, thick and full, lower and lower, and it wrapped itself even around the living, touched by death even as they lived.

He took everything death had to hit him with, breathed his last and said, "It is finished." Sin had been paid for, but its wages of death remained to be dealt with. So two righteous men laid him in a tomb. The righteous men walked away from the grave, touched by his death themselves. And the disciples were in hiding, afraid of death.

And then he turned death's victory into defeat. He wrestled it to the ground, disarmed it, and killed death. On that mountain, God won the victory over death. He swallowed it up.

All of those mountains – Sinai, the feeding of the 5,000, the mountaintop of Isaiah – they all looked ahead to Mount Calvary, to the cross and the empty tomb. And because of death's defeat on that mountain, we look forward to the marriage feast of the Lamb on the eternal mountain.

John's Revelation says: **And I heard what seemed like the roar of a large crowd or the roar of many waters or the loud rumblings of thunder, saying:**

Alleluia!

For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory,

because the wedding of the Lamb has come.

His bride has made herself ready,

and she was given bright, clean, fine linen to wear.

(In fact, the fine linen is the “not guilty” verdict pronounced on the saints.)

**The angel said to me, “Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.”
He also said to me, “These are the true words of God.”**

He extends this invitation to you right now. It is the invitation to come to the foretaste of the feast. As Moses and the elders ate with God and saw his glory, he invites you to come to this little altar mountain, for a preview of the feast on heaven’s mountain. But don’t dare come dressed in your own works. Come dressed in the righteousness Christ has given you. He makes you ready to receive this feast on this little mountain, and the feast to which it looks ahead on heaven’s mountain.

What is this feast – and that feast – about? What are we celebrating? No small thing: God hasn’t just given death a black eye or a standing eight count. He has swallowed up death forever and ever. And we’ve already seen little previews. The son of Nain’s widow sits up when Jesus speaks to him and tells him to. The daughter of Jairus rises when Jesus speaks to her and tells her to. Lazarus, dead four days, comes out when Jesus speaks to him and tells him to. Can you imagine what that was like? Can you imagine what it will be like when speaks to you and to me and to all believers on the Last Day? Our own resurrection to the wedding feast. Death swallowed up for good and all.

Martin Luther, probably during a time of intense plague and death, used a most unusual illustration for Jesus Christ. He compared the Son of God to a plague: “As a plague consumes the body little by little, so Christ is the pestilence of our death.” So our denomination is named after a man who compared Jesus to plague! Well, yes, but we must stick to the single point of comparison. He destroyed death with one swoop on Good Friday and Easter, and now he destroys it little by little, reclaiming its victims, taking home everyone, one by one, who belongs to him in faith, keeping their souls until he raises their bodies on the Last Day.

And on this mountain, this little altar mountain, he has prepared a taste of that feast of victory over death. Today death is replaced with life, sorrow replaced with joy. Do you see how Isaiah pictures the death of sorrow? **The LORD God will wipe away every tear from their faces.** Who was the last person to wipe tears off of your face? Maybe it’s too long ago for you even to remember. But whoever it was, I would guess it was not a stranger at the grocery store, or some acquaintance in your cooking club, or even a casual friend at the office. This is what best friends do. This is what mothers and fathers do for their children. And we can only do it imperfectly and incompletely. Even when a father or mother wipes away tears, they come back. There are more.

This picture is not just tender, it’s miraculous. God himself wipes away tears. How tender! And he wipes away every tear forever. That’s the wonder of the feast of heaven. And of that, too, we get a little taste today. The Master of the Universe bends down as our Friend and Father and wipes away the tears that flow for our friends and loved ones. He wipes them away because he wipes away their cause. Death is undone in the living body and blood of Christ. God takes away the stain, the shame, the reproach, and gives life to those who die in Christ. Today let him wipe away your tears.

Let him do it today, looking ahead to that day when we will say:

“Look, here is our God!

We waited for him, and he saved us!

This is the LORD!

We waited for him.

Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

The Savior has come; the Savior is coming to us today; the Savior will come again, with our salvation in his hands. And the feast without tears, with pure joy, with life forever, will explode in heaven's banquet hall. The wedding supper of the Lamb. And it will not end.

So now let's live like life and not death is always ahead of us. Because in Jesus, it is. Let's press forward with clam and steady hearts toward the resurrection, for Christ is risen and we will rise; let's live like the veil is wearing thinner and thinner, because God has already poked a giant hole in the shameful shroud of death, and rays of resurrection are already shining through. Death has been swallowed up in Jesus' victory. Alleluia! Thanks be to God. Amen.