

20th Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2026 (L28A)

Isaiah 25:1-9, Psalm 23, Matthew 22:1-14

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Banquets are the theme of the day. In addition to being featured in two of our readings and our psalm this morning, we are also gathering after the service today for a thank-you lunch hosted by the Grace Food Pantry. Gathering around food to celebrate is what we do – weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, maybe baptisms and confirmations in our tradition. And then there are the national and religious holidays – Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter, for example.

Celebratory feasting is universal across cultures and throughout time. So it's no surprise that banquets feature in the Bible as visions of the good future that God promises God's people, and it's no accident that we reflect that in our liturgy, most obviously when we sing This is the Feast of Victory for our God as our Cantic of Praise. What could be better as a final chapter to God's good creation than a feast that has no end?

I want to have quick look at most of our readings this morning, first to see what they reveal about us and our attitudes to feasting, but then with the goal of learning how we prepare for the feast that is coming. These texts, understood within the overarching context of the Bible, present us with a challenge to what we might be hoping for, and offer us something even better. They reveal a faithful way of dealing with both the bleakness of these recent Gospel readings and the discouraging state of affairs in the world, in our country, and perhaps even in our personal lives.

First, our reading from Isaiah. This is a text we often hear toward the end of the church year. Next year the second half will be one of the readings for All Saints Sunday. It's also a text that is often chosen for funerals. It is a beautiful vision of the best food and drink in celebration of God's victory over the powers of death and evil. Part of what makes the vision so compelling is that what it promises has to be waited for. Time has to pass before the final victory becomes a reality and God's people can be vindicated for the suffering and humiliation they have endured at the hands of their enemies. But there's one thing we don't notice about because we never get the full text in our lectionary. We omit the final three verses of the chapter. I suppose that's because it's a bit of a downer. It turns out that down below the mountain where this lush banquet has been spread are the traditional enemies of Israel, the Moabites. And they are getting what's coming to them, trodden down in a dung pit, unable to keep themselves from sinking into it. The Israelites in Isaiah's imagining cannot fathom a good ending for themselves that does not include a bad ending for their enemies. I'll come back to this later with a surprise about how we might tie this to the banquet in our Gospel reading.

But first, I want to mention Psalm 23, surely the favorite of all the psalms and also, like the Isaiah text, often chosen at funerals. In fact, the setting the choir just sang was also sung at Carol Shupp's funeral last month. Psalm 23 also gives us a comforting and hopeful vision of God's faithfulness and care for us. But also, like the Isaiah text, it seemingly cannot dispense with a mention of enemies. The banquet that God lays out for us there is done in the presence of foes, as our setting put it. We get to feast, they get to watch, and presumably go hungry, getting their payback for the terrible things they have done to us.

Payback continues in the Gospel reading. The king in Jesus' parable puts on a wedding banquet for his son, but his invited guests refuse to come. In fact, they mistreat his messengers, and even kill some of them. And so he sends his soldiers to destroy their city. This is a shocking and disturbing text that we might be tempted to dismiss as over the top if it didn't parallel current events so tragically well. All of the wars in the headlines today are escalating, or threatening to escalate their conflicts to apocalyptic degrees. Disproportionate payback remains as prevalent in

our day as it ever was. And in Jesus' parable it happens twice, first with the A-list guests, but then also with the B-list guest who offends the host by not wearing the expected wedding clothes, and whom the king orders to be hogtied and thrown into the "outer darkness."

This last part is a detail we easily could have edited off the end of our reading, like we have edited off the end of the Isaiah reading. We could make this a simple story of "out with old, in with the new." But it's a good thing we didn't leave it out, because it sets up the surprise that both of these readings make possible in the long arc of Scripture. I'll start with this Matthew text. Jesus' parable here is meant to draw its hearers in and show them uncomfortable truths about themselves. Just like us, they love a good revenge story. And the king delivers, in spades. But if this is a parable of the kingdom of heaven, and if we insist on seeing God only in the king, then we have to ask ourselves how the looming crucifixion of Jesus in Matthew fits into this picture. Is it just the final outrage that makes God's bloody revenge on sinful humanity palatable? Are utter destruction and the misery of the outer darkness the final word for those who dare to cross the Almighty?

Well, here comes the surprise for those who find themselves in the outer darkness, the places of weeping and despair: It is precisely in this outer darkness that Jesus is to be found. The outer darkness is where Matthew's Gospels is leading us, to the lowest depths of human experience, outside the walls of Jerusalem to the place of carnage and crucifixion. And here comes surprise number two. Remember the Moabites I mentioned earlier, the enemies of Israel that we edited off the end of that beautiful banquet scene from Isaiah, swimming in excrement down at the bottom of the mountain while the party goes on up above? Well, Jesus is one of those Moabites. Remember Ruth, the faithful Moabite woman? She is one of Jesus' ancestors, the great grandmother of King David. It's one of the first things Matthew mentions way back in chapter one. Surprise! Jesus meets us in these marginal places of hopelessness and despair because God will not be satisfied with *our* vision of victories that revel in revenge and leave enemies suffering at the bottom of the mountain or in the outer darkness. God's vision of victory refuses to perpetuate the payback game, because that game never ends, and God wants a different kind of ending for us. God comes among us as one of us in Jesus, to give us his wedding garment, and to suffer the consequences and collateral damage of our revenge games, to take upon himself the pain and suffering of the world so that he might undo them, so that he might rob sin, death, and evil of their ultimate power, and open for us a new and better future free from their grip.

I'm afraid there is going to be a lot of payback played out in the world in the days and weeks and years to come. Our only hope is in the surprising promise that God is at work in Jesus to break that endless cycle and open up a new and better future for us and for all people. The way out of the cycle is placing our hope and our trust in that surprising promise. May God grant us such faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the courage to live out the new and better life given to us in our baptism, the life that makes us agents of hope for the world. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.