

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Third Sunday of Easter  
Sunday, April 14, 2024**

**“Wipe Away the Tears”  
Isaiah 25:6-9**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

Our Old Testament from Isaiah offers a prophetic dream of a time to come. And it begins with a celebration, a party thrown with the very best to eat and drink: “On this mountain,” Isaiah says, “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” (v. 6).

And that sounds fun and all, but—when Isaiah wrote those words—I’m not sure that his contemporary audience was in any mood to celebrate. The book of Isaiah was written over many years amidst a background of violence, war, catastrophe, including the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon (cf. Barker). And somewhere amid all that upheaval and suffering, Isaiah had the audacity to declare that God is gonna throw a party and everyone’s invited.

It was a time marked by disasters: invaders attacked Jerusalem, the city was destroyed, the Jewish population was taken into exile... So who on earth would feel like a party? I think this must’ve sounded at best tone deaf—at worst, callous—to those enduring a period of such pain. I mean, what was Isaiah thinking? And yet, in what follows, Isaiah describes—in his prophetic imagination—what God will do to make a celebration rise up out of the ashes of disaster.

First, Isaiah announces what God will *destroy*: “And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations” (v. 7). In this image, the “shroud,” the “sheet”—these describe the “garments worn by mourners” (Roberts). Amid the violent upheavals of Isaiah’s day, the clothing of mourners may have been heartbreakingly common. And so Isaiah depicts this shroud of mourning, this sheet of grief—he depicts this oppressive covering as “over all peoples,” “over all nations.” Isaiah, writing amid catastrophes, envisions a cloak of grief enveloping the world.

But then he imagines God destroying that cloak—tearing it to shreds, ripping it fibre from fibre. And why? Because it won’t be needed any more. The shroud and sheet of mourning, the cloak of grief—this will be needless, superfluous—because, Isaiah says, because God “will swallow up death forever” (v. 7). I think that’s got to be one of the most potent and powerful images in Scripture: God’s gonna eat death; God will swallow death whole. Wow.

And this is about death, the cessation of life—certainly, but it’s broader, more sweeping, than that. As one scholar puts it: “Death in this passage is not merely an individual life coming to a close, but a power associated with tears, [with that] shroud of mourning” (Padgett); death here represents “the brokenness of creation” (Campbell). It’s not only about the end of life; it’s also about the kind of death we experience while we’re still alive: anxiety, discouragement, grief—these can inject death right into the midst of life. And here Isaiah is promising the destruction of

anything and everything that would cause us to wear the cloak of grief, the garments of mourning.

That, in itself, is a powerful promise—but I do wonder if Isaiah’s audience, if Isaiah’s contemporaries, might have found that promise somehow lacking. Isaiah imagines a future when God will destroy death and render grieving obsolete—but what of those who have already been oppressed by death? What of those grieving and mourning today? What about them? The future destruction of death might ring rather hollow to someone who is wearing the garments of grief right now. Yet then we hear Isaiah’s second announcement: “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” (v. 8).

God will shatter the power of death and make the garments of grieving a thing of the past—yet God will also repair what has been broken, and comfort those who have been wounded, and console those who have been weeping. Isaiah declares that God will not only break the power of death, but will also heal and repair and restore—wiping away the tears from all eyes. As one biblical scholar puts it: “God’s achingly tender side emerges. I imagine,” she writes, “God looking into the eyes of [crying] children, broken men, and care-worn women, wiping away each tear of grief and disgrace [...] as the people stand in awe, flooded with relief and joy” (Erickson).

In Isaiah’s day, God’s people Israel endured difficult waiting—waiting for God, awaiting God’s redemption—and so *waiting* is a theme that runs throughout the book of Isaiah. “O LORD, be gracious to us;” Isaiah prays, “we *wait* for you” (33:2); “those who *wait* for the LORD,” Isaiah says, “shall renew their strength” (40:31). Yet in our Lesson today, we hear how Isaiah envisions *the end of waiting* (Balentine): Isaiah announces that—after God destroys death, after God wipes away every tear—then the time of waiting will at last give way to a time of joy: “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” (v. 9).

And when people rejoice, what do they do? They eat and drink, which is precisely how our Lesson began. That seemingly tone-deaf invitation to party now—after this dream of a prophetic future—that party now seems fitting and wonderful: it’s the end of this prophecy that invites the joy of its beginning.

Now, Isaiah’s dream is so hopeful—so defiantly hopeful, hopeful against all evidence to the contrary—that there’s a risk of misreading Isaiah as an idealist who’s ignoring reality, as someone who’s *unrealistic*. But in fact, the opposite is true: Isaiah is brutally realistic. Living in a time of disaster, this ancient Jewish prophet acknowledges the painful reality: he tells it like it is! A shroud of grief is oppressing his people, death is overpowering, tears are streaking down faces... This is earthy, honest realism.

See, for Isaiah, hope isn’t about ignoring or distorting the brutal reality of death; not at all—Isaiah acknowledges all that. For Isaiah, hope is about refusing to give death and grieving the last word—because death and grieving have at most a penultimate reality, at most the second-to-last word. Because, Isaiah insists, the last word will always—always—belong to God. Death will

cast its shroud, and that's awful; yet, nevertheless, God will at last shred that shroud and swallow death whole.

And that's why this dream of a prophetic future gives us hope right here, today. As one theologian puts it, the hope of this passage “does not tear us away from the world, with its suffering [and] death [...], but gives us hope in the midst of the world, [because] the promise that one day [God] ‘will wipe away the tears from all faces’ [...] sustains the life of faith in the midst of tears and pain” (Padgett). We know that suffering and death and grief are terrible—there's no denying that; yet their power is only ever penultimate, only every second-to-last—and death will not hold final sway over us. All those oppressive forces that have power over us; these have no power over God. And the last word will belong to God, the Living God, the one who turned the grief of Good Friday into the joy of Easter morning. Amen.