

Isaiah 25:6-9 Pastor Bill Uetricht All Saints Day 11.04.21

Sometimes just plain old words won't do. Sometimes what our English teachers and professors call "prose" (ordinary, descriptive sentences) just don't make it. Sometimes you need poetry. And All Saints' day is a day for the poets, a day, as Pat Tull says, for "words too lofty for everyday reality." This is a day for big dreams, for the poetry of hope.

"On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, 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. [And then] he will wipe away the tears from all faces."

This is not the prose of rationalism, the prose that describes the way life is, but the poetry of imagination, the poetry of hope that anticipates a time when what is will give way to what could be, or as some might suggest, what should be. Oh, I am no pie-in-the-sky idealist. Trust me. I know that death is almost the realist thing of all. I know that it indeed is the shroud that is cast over peoples, over all parties, all gatherings, all celebrations. Death visits us all the time. Too often. It turns what could be a time of sheer and unadulterated joy and fun into a more tepid, reserved party. Mom is missing. Grandpa is not here. Another group of people have been shot at a school, a church, a bar. Wars continue to bring victims.

This is the data on the ground. But the poetry of hope suggests yet another reality, one that doesn't seem possible. No more crying there! No more dying there!

Now when people hear this kind of poetry, they often assign its hope to the next life, to heaven, to the final future, as I like to call it. And that is understandable and probably not a bad move. But I must

tell you, the poets of hope don't dream dreams so that we can live life simply waiting to go off to heaven. For far too much of Christian history, the hope of the gospel has been sold as a product reserved for people when they die. Even today, portions of Christianity have turned the faith into a mechanism for getting the reward of heaven: accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior and you'll go to heaven. And if you don't, well, you know, you'll.....

But Isaiah didn't write his poetry of hope ("he will swallow up death forever"), and the author of Revelation didn't write his poetry of hope ("Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and earth had passed away, and the sea was no more") so that we would be guaranteed a place in the heavenly band, but so that this life that is filled with death might be changed, might be an experience of life and hope. Karl Marx once said that religion is often an opiate for the people, and what he meant was that religion's focus simply on the next life often lulled people to sleep and caused them not to work to change this life and this world. The poets of hope in the Bible used lofty words, dreamed unimaginable dreams as a means for fueling change, a means for transforming now.

Let's peak in on what that transformation might look like. I don't know if you noticed but in Isaiah's poetry the word "all" shows up five times: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for *all* peoples; God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over *all* peoples; God will wipe away tears from *all* faces; and the disgrace of his people he will take away from *all* the earth." There is a degree of universality to Isaiah's dream. What God is up to is meant for everyone. Hope is not just designed for our group or our people.

You know, it seems sad to me that much religion is about establishing our own little kingdoms, our own little tribes. If you are like us and think like us, then you can become a part of us, you can have

communion with us. Communion, the meal that celebrates the universality of hope for all creation, becomes an experience of division. Not everyone is welcome. What? Hear the poetry of hope from Isaiah: all, all, all! To live in that poetry is to be overcome by the God whose love does not exclude but includes.

Now, I note that as I continue reading in Isaiah or Revelation that there were limits to their sense of inclusion. For Isaiah, it was the Moabites. Everybody welcome, but them. For the author of Revelation, it was the Romans and those who gave into the worship of the emperor. What do we make of this?

Inclusion is always a struggle. We're all prone to want to leave some folks out, sometimes for good reasons. But I would also say this. Inclusion is not some wispy, spineless welcome of everything. While I think all people are welcome, I do not think all things are. There are behaviors (the mistreating of others, the putting down of others, the abuse and neglect of the vulnerable) that are not acceptable. Not everything is welcome. The poetry of hope really is about the elimination of those things. They are a part of the way that the shroud of death makes itself known. In Isaiah, that shroud is removed. That sheet is eliminated. Death is swallowed up forever.

The dream of death being swallowed up forever is at the heart of the poetry of hope both in Isaiah and in Revelation. The seer of Revelation tells us: "Behold, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying will be no more."

Again, I don't think that this kind of poetry was written to lull us into sleeping until we can go off to heaven when we die. This is a dream that is meant to empower us to live as if death and its real power does not control life. And it would like to. It would like to run your show and

often it does. Death is the overriding factor in too many people's lives. For Israel, in Isaiah's day, death, experienced in war and oppression, was front and center. For the early Christians who were being addressed by Revelation, death was a constant companion. These authors wanted their audiences to know that death was not the only real thing. They in no way denied death. But in the midst of the data of death, they brought the poetry of hope to suggest that just as real as death, in fact, maybe more real, is life. Life controlled by death is not the life that is discovered in God, the God, we Christians would say, brought Jesus through death into life.

Note what happens in our gospel lesson for today. Jesus shows up at death, the tomb of his great friend Lazarus. And when he, the one who had shared in the many tears that Mary and Martha were crying, arrives at the tomb, he says, "Lazarus, come out!" Come out of death. Death is not the final word. And, we are told, the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, the clothes of death. And Jesus, the one connected to the author of life, says, "Unbind him and let go." Remove the clothes of death and set him free.

Don't get me wrong. Death's awful. Grief is awful. In the last two years, I have presided over almost 50 funerals. I know how awful death and grief are. My heart is often shaped by grief. As I said a couple of weeks ago, I've had enough of death. But in the midst of the data of death, I've experienced life time and again making itself known.

Come out of your self-imposed tombs. Be unbound. Take off the clothes of death and put on the garments of life. Let go. Rejoice. Party with abandon. Laugh uproariously. Sing like nobody's listening. Dance like nobody's watching. Welcome as if nobody is left out. Love recklessly, as if you and the ones you love don't need to keep score. Listen to, trust, and write the poetry of hope. Death is real. But life reigns.