

## ***A Celebrating Community***

Trinity CRC, October 24, 2021 AM  
Intentionally Connecting with One Another—6

## **Isaiah 25**

Rev. Richard J. deLange

This is the last message on the second part of our vision statement, intentionally connecting with one another. Today we want to focus on being a celebrating community.

**Isaiah 25** LORD, you are my God;

I will exalt you and praise your name,  
for in perfect faithfulness  
you have done wonderful things,  
things planned long ago.

<sup>2</sup> You have made the city a heap of rubble,  
the fortified town a ruin,  
the foreigners' stronghold a city no more;  
it will never be rebuilt.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore strong peoples will honor you;  
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.

<sup>4</sup> You have been a refuge for the poor,  
a refuge for the needy in their distress,  
a shelter from the storm  
and a shade from the heat.

For the breath of the ruthless  
is like a storm driving against a wall

<sup>5</sup> and like the heat of the desert.

You silence the uproar of foreigners;  
as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,  
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.

<sup>6</sup> On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare  
a feast of rich food for all peoples,  
a banquet of aged wine—  
the best of meats and the finest of wines.

<sup>7</sup> On this mountain he will destroy  
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;

<sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;  
he will remove his people's disgrace  
from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

<sup>9</sup> In that day they will say,

"Surely this is our God;  
we trusted in him, and he saved us.

This is the LORD, we trusted in him;

**let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."**

<sup>10</sup> The hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain;  
but Moab will be trampled in their land  
as straw is trampled down in the manure.

<sup>11</sup> They will stretch out their hands in it,  
as swimmers stretch out their hands to swim.

God will bring down their pride  
despite the cleverness of their hands.

<sup>12</sup> He will bring down your high fortified walls  
and lay them low;  
he will bring them down to the ground,  
to the very dust.

### **This the Word of the Lord.**

Dear Congregation,

In the story of *Babette's Feast*, two elderly sisters, Martine and Phillipa, run a small religious group in their village. The heart of the village is built around simplicity. That's partly because Martine and Phillipa had previously been very tempted to live a life of sensuality, as some call it. A handsome army man tried to lure Martine away from her village and a director of the opera invited Phillipa to sing for him in Paris because she had such a lovely voice. Both women turned down the offers. They said no to what they considered "worldly pleasures" in order to stay home with their pastor-father and help him with his mission in the village.

When this story takes place, the community has fallen on hard times. It became, said one writer, "as cold and barren as the wet, gray, windy weather" of the western coast of Denmark where it is located. Aside from the fact that this religious community prided itself in simplicity and shunned anything fancy, poison flowed through the spirit of the village. "Nearly everyone had a falling out with someone else in the town. Many were not speaking to each one another. Pride and grievances had been nursed, and bitterness had grown to painful proportions." Some said, "The village was an utterly joyless place." (*The Prodigal God*, Timothy Keller, 129).

Now, Babette, a renowned French chef, flees Paris because of a political crisis there. She ends up in this tiny Danish village where she gets a job as chief cook and bottle washer for the now elderly sisters. After living in that community for several years and making meals from the meagre ingredients she is given, Babette suddenly discovers that she has won ten thousand francs. It's more money than she's ever seen in her life and more money than the people of her village are used to.

As she contemplates what to do with her winnings, Babette thinks of everything the community has done for her. The poison in the hearts of many in the community has not reached her. She appreciates that this place provided her a haven of safety after she fled from Paris. So out of love for this community, she decides to use her chef skills to prepare the best meal these Danish people have

ever had. She sends to Paris for all the finest food, plus china, glassware and cutlery. She spends her entire fortune for this one meal.

When the supplies arrive, the sisters leading this community learn of Babette's plan. They believe there's something spiritually improper and sinful about enjoying such an extravagant meal. But because they know Babette wants to show love to them, they don't want to hurt her feelings. So they secretly instruct everyone in the community to eat the food but to keep their minds on something else. They don't want to give the impression that they are enjoying a luxurious meal because that would betray their commitment to simplicity.

While the banquet is served these church folks talk about everything but the food. Even as the smell wafts through the air and the food dances on their tongues, they don't let on that they've never had such delicious food in their whole life. But there's one visiting soldier in town. He knows nothing about the instructions to keep silent about the food. He thoroughly enjoys everything that passes through his lips. He can't find words to explain how delicious it is. And every time he mentions his delight to the people around him, they just talk about the weather as **if they are eating stale bread**. To him, the food is the best he's ever smelled and tasted; it has gladdened his heart and he can't help but talk about it.

One author said, "The power of (Babette's) feast began to break through the defenses of the people. One by one, under the influence of wonderful food and drink, former enemies began to soften toward one another. Comments and words as sweet as the food began to pass between them. Forgiveness was sought and granted. Two women who had not spoken with each other for many years now touched foreheads affectionately, saying, "God bless you, dear Solveig' and 'God bless you, too, dear Anna.' Finally, Phillipa began to sing with her pure and beautiful voice, people's hearts were further lifted as everyone listened and" enjoyed the astounding musical gift she had. (Keller, 130)

This communal celebration changed lives. Perhaps you've noticed before that great food and celebrations break down walls. So we turn to Isaiah 25 which encapsulates some of what it means for us to be a celebrating community.

### **Celebrating our Saviour**

Celebrating as a community of believers starts with remembering the One who is the source of all our blessings—most notably, our salvation. Isaiah 25 begins with praise to God for what he's done for Israel. "*Lord, you have done wonderful things.*" v.1 declares. For Isaiah, that meant destroying Israel's enemies. He says of God's actions toward them and their city,

*You have made the city a heap of rubble,  
the fortified town a ruin,  
the foreigners' stronghold a city no more;  
it will never be rebuilt.*

The enemy is crushed by the hand of God.

We likewise share in the joy of even better good news. Satan's head is crushed by Jesus. Sin is defeated. Even death will be no more. Our lives are forever changed through the salvation God in Christ has bought for us.

Over and over and over again the Bible calls God's people to celebrate our salvation and all of God's blessings to us. We've spent a number of weeks looking at stories of Israel's journey through the desert and their learning to follow God as his disciples. The Lord seems to have to give constant reminders of his grace to his people. And we need reminders as well.

That's the power of celebrations. We need celebrations of God's grace to keep us from thinking we can earn God's favour through our own acts of righteousness.

The story of Babette's Feast is built around a community that prided itself on simplicity, as if that might be the way to find true life. Likewise in Jesus' days on earth, the Jewish leadership had created a culture of spiritual pride built around outer signs alone. It was all about putting on a good show. Do the right stuff and God will absolutely save you.

Isaiah 25:7 talks about God lifting the shroud that enfolds all people. In Christ-centered celebrations, we recognize afresh that God *lifts* this blinding shroud. In context, we understand it be a shroud like a black veil worn by those who are grieving. The Lord destroys it, says v.7. Left to ourselves, we continue to live in the bondage of darkness and despair, which includes the sorrow of death as well as the blindness of sin which makes us think we are greater than we are.

If you flip to Leviticus 23 now or later, you'll see how it spells out seven communal celebrations for Israel. Each one of the seven Jewish festivals praises the Lord for his provision for his people. Most notably, the annual Passover celebrates God sparing the eldest sons of Israel by sacrificing a lamb and wiping its blood on the doorpost of your house—in the form of a cross! Jesus fulfills that as our once-for-all Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! So today we celebrate the Lord's Supper to remember what he's done. God wants us to celebrate his goodness and grace to us.

We need reminders. The power of celebrating God's grace to us together is in keeping us humble. It keeps us seeing God in all of his splendour, grace and goodness and it keeps us longing for the day when his grace will completely transform the world and completely lift the shroud of disgrace.

## **Ways to Celebrate**

So what are some of the ways we should celebrate together as God's people?

1. First, it seems clear from what we've already said that—in the Lord's Supper—we celebrate what God has done for us. **We celebrate his grace to us in Christ as we partake of sacraments.**

The convenience and, in these pandemic days, the more sanitary way of sharing elements (in these tiny little cups) might not always give us the best picture of feasting on the Lord's grace. Isaiah pictures a feast like this:

*Is 25:6 On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare  
a feast of rich food for all peoples,  
a banquet of aged wine—  
the best of meats and the finest of wines.*

That sounds like a good spread, something that expresses celebration. It will gladden the spirit while it also refreshes the body. When we come to the Lord's Supper, to this holy meal, do we treat it like stale bread the way the folks were instructed to look at Babette's meal? Or is there a sense that our lavish salvation has been prepared for us at a great cost—the cost of Jesus' own life? Do we understand the work of the host who offers it to us—his suffering and death? Therefore, do we savour it with gratitude while we eat? Does our mind and heart fill with praise to Jesus? Does our heart rejoice as our soul is fed?

Celebrating the Lord's Supper together helps us focus on Jesus because we know Jesus has lifted the shroud of sin from our eyes and heart. As we commune with Christ and are nurtured by his grace, it changes us. His grace helps to break down barriers, like it did when people ate Babette's food. It removes pride and strengthens our faith. We benefit from his gifts to us in this sacrament.

2. Secondly, it seems that **worship more generally should be seen as a vital celebration in our lives.**

Isaiah 25:6 talks about the community gathering on the holy mountain, Zion, or Jerusalem. They gather together before the Lord in celebration. If you go back to Leviticus 23, the whole list of seven annual celebrations—in Jerusalem—is preceded by a reminder to observe the Sabbath every week, wherever you are.

I know this pandemic has changed our lives. When online worship was all new, people would tell me how they'd watch 2 or 3 or sometimes even more worship services on a Sunday. I did the same thing. Partly because there was nothing else to do.

Now that our world is more open again, finding time for just one service on Sundays might be more challenging if we don't recognize the value of this time together. Do we think of Sunday worship like the spread of Babette's feast in the Danish village? Or do we treat worship like stale bread?

In my first congregation, a woman said to me, "Pastor, it's like you preach every sermon with me in mind! Every week I come to worship and the sermon seems to speak directly to my heart." Rather than letting my head swell, the Lord quickly helped me to remember that this woman came to worship hungry. She told me that every Saturday she prepared for worship by asking the Lord to meet her in worship, to feed her with his grace. And that's what the Holy Spirit did because she came hungry, she came eager to meet with Jesus as she gathered with his people every week to celebrate his goodness.

I've been preaching long enough to know that I seldom "hit it out of the park", if ever. But even if I did, the best sermons can fall on cold hearts and leave people saying, "I didn't get anything out of that!" I'll add that the sermon is not the only way that the Lord meets us in worship. Every song, every Bible reading, every prayer, sacrament and offering are used by the Holy Spirit to touch our hearts and feed us with God's grace. It's important that we come to worship—even if only online for a time—and recognize that the Lord is meeting with us. We are here to celebrate together the goodness of God to us and to give him praise. We gather as the body to praise the Head, our Lord Jesus. In short, we need to worship together for our spiritual good. It does feed our souls. Friends, we deprive ourselves of God's grace by ignoring his gift of community worship.

3. Thirdly, and more generally, Isaiah 25 reminds us to **celebrate the good things in life as gifts from God.**

Verse 1, for example, says,

*I will exalt you and praise your name,  
for in perfect faithfulness  
you have done wonderful things,  
things planned long ago.*

There are many occasions for us to celebrate the perfect faithfulness of God. It's not only our salvation and his perfect plan to save us in Christ.

For Israel it was God's work in saving them from Moab and other enemies mentioned here in Isaiah 25. So today we can celebrate things like Remembrance Day, recalling God's care for us through soldiers who gave their lives to protect our freedoms. The Jews similarly celebrate Purim, which recalls how they were saved from Haman's wicked plot to eradicate their nation during the days of Esther.

When we look throughout Scripture, there are illustrations of all sorts of blessings from the Lord. As the Ark of the Covenant is brought into Jerusalem, Second Samuel 6 tells us,

*<sup>2 Sam 6:5</sup> David and all Israel were celebrating with all their might before the Lord, with castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals.*

Later in that chapter David is dancing and even gives everyone a party favour—a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins (v.19).

We do well to celebrate all God's blessing together. Weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, professions of faith, baptisms, graduations, promotions and more. The Israelites celebrated bringing in the harvest, lots of weddings and national milestones. Together they celebrated blessings God to them. Likewise, Jesus celebrated at the wedding in Cana as well as specifically religious holidays.

The point is that we celebrate together to recognize God's provisions and give him praise. It doesn't have to involve a worship service. There are many opportunities to celebrate together the goodness of God to us. Don't let those times pass without celebrating God's provision and blessing in them!

4. Finally, we should **celebrate the things in the life to come.**

As Christians, we live in the light of eternity. We live in anticipation that, while this life has many good things to celebrate, a day is coming when the Lord returns and makes all things new. Isaiah 25, like Revelation 21, celebrates that. As Isaiah talks about God lifting the shroud of gloom, he writes,

*The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears  
from all faces;*

The Apostle John in Revelation looks ahead to the return of Jesus and the renewal of all things in the life to come. Jesus lifts this shroud once and for all. John writes of Jesus,

*Rev 21:4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'*

We celebrate this every time we have a funeral. We don't celebrate death, but we do celebrate that death has been defeated in Christ and that he ensures for us that the life to come will be far, far greater! As sweet as this life is, something greater awaits.

We will say goodbye to our brother Herb on Tuesday. But Herb knew what awaited him on the other side of this life. He was excited about that. He was certain of it. So while we grieve our loss of this brother, we celebrate his safe arrival into the presence of Jesus. He's wonderfully saved by God's amazing grace. His faith is sight. And one day everything will be made new and our tears will be no more. That's worth celebrating now already, even with tears still in our eyes. We do so, knowing a day awaits when tears of sorrow will be forever gone!

We also celebrate the things yet to come when we have the Lord's Supper. In this means of grace we confess that our hearts commune with Christ in anticipation of being with him face to face. One widow said that the time when we celebrate the Lord's Supper is the time when she feels closest to her husband who is already in heaven where he is feasting with the Lord.

Through our celebrating the Lord's Supper together, we look forward to full unity with Christ and a reunion with those who have gone before us. And having lifted our hearts to our eternal home, we begin to live with brothers and sisters here on earth more and more like we will live with them in heaven. There all sin is gone, heartaches healed, and relationships become deeper and sweeter than ever. We celebrate together that Jesus is making all things new. And we enjoy a foretaste of that now.

Dear church family, I honestly feel like I've just scratched the surface of why God calls us to be a celebrating community. But I pray that we all keep our eyes on Jesus and allow his grace to draw us together more fully so that we continue to celebrate his gifts together.

Amen.