**October 28, 2018**

**Isaiah 25:6-10; Revelation 21:1-6a**

Let’s set the scene on this fabulous mountain:

On one side are the Hebrew people who have lived in exile for years. They were intimately familiar with death – physically, emotionally, spiritually, relationally. After their defeat by enemy forces, they saw the deaths of friends and family. Survivors may have experienced the death of their mental health after watching these war scenes of pillaging and rape and murder. Then when those Israelite survivors were captured and taken into exile, they witnessed the death of their homeland as they were forcibly pulled out of the promised land. The priests and temple were disbanded. The legacy holders of the faith died and dispersed, taking the sacred rituals and laws with them. Their gardens died without attention. The homes that they built crumbled without daily life and maintenance. As the survivors were later forced into slavery in a strange land, they experienced the death of their freedom and independence, the death of choices and opportunities. Their lives became such that death was more familiar than life itself. Hope and joy and love were distant memories. They sang of their misery in Psalm 137, “By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept and wept for Zion.” A shroud fell over them as they mourned for what was, moving farther and farther away from their memories of God’s goodness.

Standing nearby the Israelites on this mountain were the Assyrians and Babylonians and Egyptians and the throngs of invading conquerors – remember that this is a mountain for all people. This mountain is not just for the chosen people. God’s holy mountain is home to all the world’s people. And while those conquerors were the champions over Isaiah’s group of Israelites, the conquerors are equally familiar with death. They saw the death of *their own* homeland when the Israelites invaded generations before. The conquerors saw the death of their family lands, household gods and rituals, their cattle and livestock. They saw the death of their family members after God’s *chosen* army defeated them, killing soldiers and civilians alike.

The death shroud which covered the Israelites also covered the conquerors, making a suffocating presence, preventing anyone from knowing true peace and joy and the fullness of God’s hope for human life. The death shroud covered all people, not just God’s chosen people. Friends and enemies, neighbors and strangers. All are familiar with death.

On the other side of that mountain, however, there are no people. God is feverishly working over the stove, wiping dirty hands on her apron, leaving trails of batter and tastings, and smearing her face with flour. God is opening the best bottles of wine to air before pouring. God is pulling out the family table cloth, folding the matching napkins, and setting the places with her favorite family dishes, each chipped and dinged with memories of previous celebrations. There was the time she served Noah’s family a meal of fresh fish on the ark. There was another time when she prepared delicious dates and honey for the Egyptians. Another time she cooked hobo packs over the fire when Hagar and Ishmael were wandering in the desert. … This meal will be different, though. This meal won’t be for one side of the family or the other; this meal is for everyone. God is single-handedly preparing a lavish feast for all the people of the world: all God’s people. It’s like our Thanksgiving meal preparations, with delicious scents wafting down the hall. The house is warm and inviting. The air is heavy with layers of flavors. And Uncle Bob is about to have to sit next to Aunt Sue even though they both would rather not.

And when the dinner bell rings, God will whip the sheet off, like a great magician. Not off the table (for that is already set), but pull the death sheet shroud off the peoples. The death that they saw and smelled and touched will be gone. Their fuzzy vision will be clarified. The tears that they shed, the disgrace that they felt, the sins and problems and things that separated them from God and one another will all be gone. Their attention won’t be on their unexpected or unwanted neighbors; no, they will only have eyes for God. In this moment, their hearts will be full of praise and thanksgiving. They will know the fullness of God’s goodness. “Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.” They will be glad and rejoice in God’s salvation. For they did not save themselves. This will be the Lord’s doing. The Lord’s hand will rest on this mountain.

Although we know God’s promises, although we have hope in the Lord, we *still* live underneath the death shroud. We cannot see clearly – we cannot see with God’s clarity – because death obstructs every view. Literally, we know the death of friends and family. We know the death of nations and institutions. We know the death of values and hopes and dreams and all that is dear to us. While living, it is as though we are handicapped, limited from the fullness of what God designed our life to be. So that every good and perfect gift we receive, we also see as flawed. Your beautiful baby cries through the night and keeps you from being well-rested. The hem on your new dress popped in one spot where no one else will notice, but it will drive you crazy. Your anniversary dinner was *fine*, but not amazing from top to bottom. We say, “that’s life!” Or rather, that is our *experience* of life. Theologian Richard Rohr wrote that human “life is both loss and renewal, death and resurrection, chaos and healing at the same time; life seems to be a collision of opposites.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

Christian practice pushes us to try to see this collision of opposites. While we notice the death shroud pressing down on us, we also give thanks for the life God gives us. 1) We say a Prayer of Confession in worship each week AND an Assurance of Pardon, remembering that whatever sin we committed is already forgiven; God wills life for us. 2) When hunger and death and sin surround us, we continue to look for answered prayers and small miracles in the world; these are signs of God’s presence and life around us. 3) In this season where natural life is dying on the vine and falling off the trees, while animals are going into hiding, we point to the new life already growing within. New leaves and new buds and new babies will arrive in a few months after this winter germination. 4) Christologically, without Jesus’ death and time in the tomb, the resurrection would never have been. … Our faithful ears are attuned to ways that God is at work in the world, removing and triumphing over death, bringing God’s vision of life to bear. These are the moments when we catch a glimpse of what God is preparing for us. There are moments when we get a whiff of what God’s cooking in the kitchen.

When a Christian dies, and the Christian community brings their body for burial, we stand on God’s holy mountain. We see both the death that separates us and we see the goodness that God prepares for them. We see the shroud that affected their vision, and the eternal life that God gives them now. We watch their primary identity shift from being a man or woman or child or parent or cancer patient or retiree to being a saint of God. Just as they were named and claimed in their baptism – without their personal last name, but as a “child of God” – now they are freed from the confines of life and free to live only in God’s glory. They no longer have tears on their faces. They no longer suffer indignity or disgrace. They are free from road rage and grumpy neighbors and heartbreaking political discord. They are free for rest and praise and eternal life. And while we are sad that they are no longer with us, we are relieved and comforted that God’s promises are no longer a hope, but a reality.

All Saints Day is a time to remember those who have suffered with us in life and have gone ahead of us to life eternal with God. We remember their names and faces, the significant legacies they’ve left behind – the battles they won and lost – and the rest that they now have. As we do so, we acknowledge that we are still caught under the shroud. We still see with clouded vision, waiting that day when God will pull out our chair for the eternal feast.

One prayer from our Book of Common Worship is frequently used at Presbyterian funerals. In it, we praise God for the care God gives us in life and in death. We also ask God’s ongoing and compassionate presence to stay with us here and now, until we, too, know the fullness of God’s eternal feast. This prayer is one of my personal comforts when I must say goodbye to those I’ve known and loved. So let us close with these familiar words:

“Eternal God, we bless you for the great company of all those who have kept the faith, finished their race, and who now rest from their labor. We praise you for those dear to us whom we name in our hearts before you. . . . Help us to believe where we have not seen, trusting you to lead us through our years. Bring us at last with all your saints into the joy of your home, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen”**

1. Rohr, Richard. Falling Upward. Jossey-Bass, 2011. pg. 54 and 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)