

The great feast

Texts: Isa. 25:6–9, Matt. 8:11

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What a magnificent supper this is!
This is no ordinary eating and drinking!
When we celebrate the Lord's Supper on Eternity Sunday,
the distance between heaven and earth thins out,
and the great divide grows porous.

This is an appetizer from the heavenly banquet table.
It whets our appetite for what is to come.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper on Eternity Sunday,
we anticipate the meal which those who have gone before us
in the faith share in all its fullness,
that feast to which "many shall come from east and west,
and from north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God."

It's no wonder, then, that while awaiting his death
German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said,
"Come, thou greatest of feasts! Come, thou greatest of feasts!"

But this connection of a feast
with the fullness of God's salvation—
where does it come from, anyway?

It goes back at least as far
as God providing that strange substance manna
for some desperate runaway slaves in the wilderness.

It's there in the assurance of Psalm 23:
"You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies,"
a festive meal to celebrate God's generous care,
even in the very face of danger.

And in the book of Isaiah,
the idea of a messianic banquet comes to the fore:
a lavish feast that takes place
in some unimaginable time in the future
when the Messiah will have come.

And again, the word is given to people
who are in desperate straits,
whose city, Jerusalem, is falling into enemy hands.
They must leave this place,
and their very identity as a people
seems in serious danger.

Right then Isaiah announces a time when people from everywhere
will stream to Jerusalem for a feast beyond all comparison,
a fat banquet, a wine banquet,
a banquet of juice marrow, of good wine,
beyond anything the winery restaurants
of the Niagara Peninsula have to offer.

It will be said on that day,
"Lo, this is our God;
we have waited for him that he might save us."

Isaiah imagines a royal invitation extended to all peoples.
It's held on Mt. Zion so they can have an audience
with Yahweh, Lord of Hosts.
At this banquet, God will announce a great royal deed.
The shroud, the shadow of death
that has plagued the land and all its peoples,
is going to be removed, lifted, swallowed up.
And death will be replaced with life, sorrow with joy.

Jesus alluded to the messianic banquet
when he said that many will come
from east and west, from north and south,
and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
in the kingdom of God.

But he did much more than that.
He brought the banquet into the here and now
when he fed 5000 people with a little boy's lunch,
when in a parable he invited the poor, the crippled,
the blind, and the lame to a banquet where all is ready now,
and when he took common bread and common wine,
and made of them a feast
both of remembrance and of anticipation.

But what about us?
Where are we in all this?

That time has not yet fully come when death shall be no more.
We long for death to be swallowed up, for we have here today
a whole vase full of flowers of remembrance for loved ones—
parents, grandparents, siblings, children, friends, mentors.
We long for all sadness and pain to be no more.

We long for God's justice and shalom to be established,
for nations to stop lifting up swords
and guns and missiles against nations,
for people to find food and warmth and home.

We live in an in-between time of groaning and longing.
In fact, the whole creation is in labor,
eagerly awaiting its redemption.
And sometimes all we can do is rely on God's Spirit
to intercede for us and for our world
with sighs too deep for words.

And yet at the same time—at the very same time
when all this groaning and longing is going on—
we are invited to a banquet.

We are invited to the banquet *now*—
for Christians have always had their feet in two worlds at once.

We believe that in Jesus' coming to us,
in his life, his ministry, his death and resurrection,
God's future time has already begun.
We believe that in his person Jesus has conquered death,
being raised to new life by God the Father.
And we see little signs of this new life everywhere,
if we're looking.
Miracles of all sorts happen in our midst.

And so, we live in overlapping time.
We live in the ordinary time of now,
with its combination of joys and sorrows,
with its injustices, its unanswered questions, its pain.
But in this feast we also live in the time
when God's reign is fully realized.

Feasting in the kingdom
has always been one meaning of communion.
This meal of the church is a foreshadowing of the great banquet
when people of all nations will eat and drink with joy
in the presence of God.

It is indeed an appetizer.
Christ is truly present at this meal,
and yet at the same time we await his coming.
At every communion, we are given a taste of the future,
and the prayer for Christ to return is partially fulfilled.

In this meal, we are also brought near
to those who have gone on before us in the Lord,
those who are beyond the appetizers.
There's traffic across the bridge that connects heaven and earth.
There's a communion of saints
that slides between the now
and what is to come.

For this meal reminds us that we're all invited
to the greatest of all wedding parties,
the marriage supper of the Lamb,
in which the whole redeemed community
will be united with Christ
in a way we can scarcely comprehend.

In the meantime, we live in hope.
We live in overlapping time.
We accept the invitation to this feast now,
even as we anticipate the feast that is to come.

Even so, Lord, quickly come.