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Christ the King/Reign of Christ

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“From the Mountaintop”

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Isaiah 25:1-10

O Lord, you are my God;

I will exalt you; I will praise your name;

For you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure.

2 For you have made the city a heap,

*the fortified city a ruin; the palace of aliens is a city no more,
it will never be rebuilt.*

3 Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;

cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

4 For you have been a refuge to the poor,

*a refuge to the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.*

When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,

*5 the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place, you subdued the heat
with the shade of clouds; the song of the ruthless was stilled.*

6 On this mountain 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.*

7 And he will destroy on this mountain

*the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;*

8 he will swallow up death forever.

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.*

9 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.

10 For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

The Moabites shall be trodden down in their place

as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit.

From the Mountaintop

On April 3, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his final speech in Memphis Tennessee. In what would later become known as his “I’ve been to the mountaintop,” speech, King called for unity, economic actions, boycotts, and nonviolent protest in the midst of inhumane labor conditions. King delivered this passionate speech to denounce the injustice on the part of the City of Memphis towards their public employees, specifically the sanitation workers. But his prophetic words were not just meant for those who heard them in Memphis. It was a rally cry across the country and the world to unite for freedom and liberation, to dispel a system that was based on power and influence and build a community that was spiritually alive; radically inclusive, and justice-centered. King was holding this country to its foundational promises

“Somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for rights.”

As he concluded his speech, he pulled back the shroud and painted an image of what can be if we work together across our differences for a greater good. re-orientate our hearts and minds towards compassion and justice; and dare to show up and be in solidarity with those who to don't have the access and privilege that others have been afforded, because of the color of their skin, gender, or economic status.

In the words of Isaiah this morning, the prophet pulls back the shroud of mystery and reveals to us a glimpse of God's kingdom. A place where all people will experience God's freely given abundance and the safety and peace of God's sanctuary, regardless of who they are, what they have done, and maybe most shockingly, what they believe. In this song of thanksgiving the prophet describes a loving God, who holds us accountable for our actions, challenges us to do better, and equips each one of us to liberate ourselves from own suffering. This text weaves a poetic message that God cares more about belonging and being part of the just and equitable community, then if we have the “right” beliefs.

Isaiah opens this speech with a communal hymn of praise and gratitude for all that God has provided to the people in the midst of their pain and suffering. The prophet then does two things that are specific to this passage, and different from all of the other texts in the book of Isaiah. The writer spends a great deal of time detailing God's banquet feast; what there is to eat and drink, but most importantly who would be invited to this grand celebration. This lofty poetry is not the description of what is available now; it is the promise of what is to come when we are in right relationship with one another, the natural world, and God. This aspirational song gives hope in the midst of our own chaos and suffering. The words of Isaiah are similar to the aspirational saying of our own history "we the people of the United States, in order or form a more perfect Union..."; "All men were created equal;" "I have a dream that one day my three little children will be judged not on the color of their skin but on the content of their character;" or "Yes We Can." – all statements of aspiration and songs of hope for what is possible when we dream together and challenge conventional wisdom.

In President Barack Obama's capstone address, at the end of his presidency in January of 2017, he reflected on a movement that inspired millions of people, that gave hope to a country of a better tomorrow.

"I am asking you to believe," he reflected, "Not in my ability to bring about change — but in yours. I am asking you to hold fast to that faith written into our founding documents; that idea whispered by slaves and abolitionists; that spirit sung by immigrants and homesteaders and those who marched for justice. That creed reaffirmed by those who planted flags from foreign battlefields to the surface of the moon; a creed at the core of every American whose story is not yet written:

Yes, we can.

Yes, we did.

Yes, we can.”

What are your dreams to change the world? Many of us have aspirations to change the world, but few of us actually will make the big systematic changes that King, Obama, and Jesus actually made. Changing the world on the scale of these three prophetic voices might seem like an insurmountable task: How do I solve gun violence, racism, misogyny, white supremacy, sexual and gender exploitation, violence, fear and the multitude of other ways society seeks to systematically dehumanize and destroy people who do not fit into our hegemonic imagination? Instead of being paralyzed by the audacious complexity of the conventional wisdom; what if we shifted our minds and hearts to change ourselves? Big scale change, God-sized change begins with each one of us. As a Christian community, we have two amazing resources that serve as our catalyst and guide of self-change: The ancient texts and stories of our tradition and the table, both of these are the places where we can encounter God, others, and ourselves in a subversive way that disrupts the conventional wisdom of our time.

The Bible is not a set of instructions that can give us simple answers nor a text with which to prove points or justify harmful and destructive actions. It's a collection of stories about belonging — our belonging to God. The Bible is the road map that guides us to a freedom and liberation from the conventional wisdom that separates us from one another. Its words paint a picture of a society very different from ours – a society where all people have an equal voice, and those on the margins are brought into the center, not to displace those who are part of society, but to join them in partnership. It provides hope and inspiration that moves beyond the transactional mode of relationship to a covenantal relationship that is justice centered and fiercely loving.

If the Bible is our roadmap to a new society, a new paradigm, then the table is the compass, the thing that allows us to orient ourselves and know in which direction we are headed. Each time we come to God's table we experience the promise of God's banquet, that breaks down the artificial barrier we, as broken

people, build to protect ourselves and our treasure. Isaiah uses this text to show the world that God desires for all peoples. God extends an open invitation for each one of us, all people, and all nations. The only way to be excluded from God's banquet is if we exclude ourselves.

In Dr. Seuss' *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, the Grinch is a bitter, grouchy, cave-dwelling creature with a heart that is "two sizes too small" who has secluded himself on the snowy Mount Crumpit, a steep high mountain north of the town of Whoville, home of the merry and warm-hearted Whos. Each year the Grinch can hear the noisy Christmas festivities that take place in Whoville. Continuously annoyed, the Grinch devises a wicked scheme to steal The Whos presents, trees, and food for their Christmas feast. He crudely disguises himself as Santa Claus and forces his dog Max, disguised as a reindeer, to drag a sleigh down the mountain towards Whoville. Once at Whoville, the Grinch slides down the chimney of one house after another and steals all of the Whos' Christmas presents, the Christmas tree, and the log for their fire.

After spending all night stealing stuff from the houses of Whoville, the Grinch prepares his journey back to Mount Crumpit and intends to dump all of the Christmas stuff into the abyss, but Max, utilizing every last of his strength to pull the sleigh upward, causes the sleigh to get stuck on a cliff. As dawn arrives, the Grinch expects the people in Whoville to let out bitter and sorrowful cries but is confused to hear them singing a joyous Christmas song instead. He puzzles for a moment until it dawns on him that "maybe Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more" than just presents and feasting. The Grinch's shrunken heart suddenly grows three sizes. The reformed and liberated Grinch begins having second thoughts and returns to the village to give back all of the Whos' Christmas stuff as he re-joins this community. Despite his previous bad actions, the Whos extend a warm invitation, to the Grinch, to join them for their Christmas feast. The Grinch then accepts their invitation and joins them at the Whos' table where he has the honor of carving the Roast Beast.

God is always there, no matter the artificial barriers that we impose to separate ourselves from our relationships with each other, the natural world, and God. God is always there, welcoming us to have a seat at God's table and join the abundant feast that God has laid out before us. The feast of thanksgiving that is celebrated at God's table is a gift freely given, without expectation of return. The table is not an aspiration of a time yet to come but a tangible representation of the Kingdom of God, in this time and place.

Sarah Miles, in her memoir of her spiritual journey, *Take This Bread*, describes how God's table is the way that God liberates each one of us, all of us, no matter who we are, or what we have done. Sarah, after creating a weekly food pantry that is housed in the sanctuary of the church, where each Friday afternoon people gather around the communion table, recalls how she began to understand why Christians imagined the kingdom of heaven as a feast. A banquet where nobody was excluded, where the weakest and most broken, the worst sinners and outcasts, were honored guests who welcomed one another in peace and shared their food. "Let this broken bread and shared wine be a foretaste of your kingdom," we sang, "and bring us finally to your heavenly Table, where no one is left behind, and we will join with saints and angels at the feast you have prepared from the beginning.

What would it look like for dreams of respect, dignity, and equity for all people to be realized? Would it be the fulfillment of God's Kingdom, here and now? A place where we can freely share our authentic selves, knowing that God welcomes us, not for what we believe, or what we do, but for who we authentically are. At the center of God's roadmap is the table, guiding us towards the promise of God's kingdom in this time; is where we find the liberation from conventional wisdom and freedom that come with living a spiritually alive, radically inclusive, and justice-centered life.

Amen