

Marvelous Meal on the Mountain
23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time
Sept 6, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

Isaiah 25:1-9
Matthew 5:1-12

In the time before the kingdom of Israel, the Bible tells us, people built altars worship God at places that they particularly felt God's presence. Often, these altars were built on mountains or hills, but they would also be built near important water sources and historically significant locations – it was a visible way to mark the way that God had interacted with the people. Now, when I say altar, I don't mean a pretty, carved-limestone and marble stone the size of a table – instead, most of these ancient altars were a collection of stones from the surrounding rock, piled and leveled, making enough room for a large fire and a place for animal sacrifice. These altars – called “high places” in the Bible – were set up at the landing point of the Noah's Ark, and where Jacob dreamed of the ladder, and at Sinai, when Moses brought down the commandments. Later, the Ark of the Covenant was seen as God's dwelling place, but animal sacrifices and worship continued at the high places. Even Solomon built the temple at Jerusalem, and the priests proclaimed that true worship could only take place there, still people worshipped at the high places. Indeed, when the northern and southern kingdoms divided from each other after Solomon's death, one of the main things keeping them separate was that the northern kingdom continued to worship at the high places and not at the temple!¹

There's good lessons to be learned from setting places of worship on mountains. The journey to the high place provides a time of reflection – it's hard work to climb the mountain, to approach God and ask forgiveness – but it's much easier on the way down, once your spiritual burdens are lifted. Fires at the high places make for good landmarks, both for finding your way around the community

¹ The Temple being located in Jerusalem, in the southern Kingdom (Judah)

and as a reminder to you to worship as well. Mostly, worship at the high places was not in itself a communal activity, but more individual – you’d go to the high place with your sacrifice, and either sacrifice it yourself, or if there was a priest handy, ask them to perform the sacrifice. Usually, the animal was cooked on the fire, a portion given to the priests, and the larger portion taken by the family to eat and share with their neighbors. There was no sermon in this worship – except if a prophet happened to come by and chose to speak at the high place rather than at the gates or in the marketplace of the town.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, these sacrifices mostly happened at the Temple, with some worship at the high places continuing, too. The Temple was built on top of Mount Zion, covering it with a huge place of worship, a resting place for the Ark of the Covenant. It was here that the prophet Isaiah spoke to a gathered crowd, contrasting the “ruthless cities” on the plains with the city on This Mountain. Despite the destruction of cities and fortified structures, Isaiah says, there is hope – hope for the poor, for the downtrodden, and eventually, everyone.

Isaiah says, “On this mountain, God will prepare a feast for the people.” A feast, full of delicious food and exquisite drink – fattening and celebratory. Remember, most people in the ancient world didn’t eat meat regularly, much less the “best” portions – the flavorful fatty portions. And did you catch this? While the people, hungry after years of wartime deprivation, are eating their fill of the most delicious smorgasbord they had ever imagined, God is devouring something, too. God eats their mourning shroud, devouring death itself! Everyone is eating at this feast – not just the Israelites and the Judahites, but even those of the foreign nations, whose cities have been destroyed. This feast isn’t a reward for belief in God, or for saying or doing the right things – it’s a feast of grace, of love, of joy for all. And at this feast, filled with people who had been at war with each other, all mocking stops, and the people eat together. Truly, this is a marvelous meal on the mountain!

Of course, time passes, and people try to make sense of Isaiah’s words. After all, the people had been sent into exile, leaving the mountain of Zion, the high place

of high places, the holy of holies – and had to rebuild it on their return. When would death be swallowed up? When would people of all tribes and nations worship God together, eat together, and find joy together?

Imagine, then, to hear of a prophet and teacher on a mountain nearby. You don't have to walk more than a day to go hear him preach, so you head out to listen. There, just as Isaiah did, this new prophet preaches about the poor and distressed, those full of mercy, and those that are hungry and thirsty, and even those who are mocked!

He says, “Blessed are the poor, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them. Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are they seeking refuge, for they will have shelter in the whole earth. Blessed are the ones who hunger and thirst, for they will be satisfied. Blessed are the ones who are full of mercy, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are God's children. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the ones mocked and persecuted for my sake, for a great reward awaits.”

These words, called the Beatitudes,² echo throughout Jesus' life and ministry. Taken as a commentary on Isaiah's familiar words, they call to mind the feast, that marvelous meal on the mountain that connects all people to God. When 5000 people later eat a miraculous meal, it echoes back to the feast. When Jesus is crucified upon the hill called Golgotha, we mourn – and then remember that God promises to swallow up death. At Jesus' resurrection, we celebrate along with the apostles, remembering Paul's words, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”³ – for at long last, God has shown what it means to have eternal life. We see and know that the promise of a banquet, eating

² Beatus in Latin means “Blessed” – the first word in each of these statements.

³ I Corinthians 15:54

together with God and each other, is a promise that God has kept.

And so, next week, when we celebrate communion, we remember all of this at once. We mourn at the beginning of communion, remember Jesus' body broken and blood shed – but God swallows up our mourning and we rejoice in Jesus' resurrection by its end. The high place of sacrifice is not ours to bring, but God's to provide – and our communion together is a bit of the taste of what will come.

This month, especially, we want to do something to remind us of our connection through Christ. As we begin to meet in person again, we know that there are many who are not ready to be here in their body, but still remain connected through Christ's body. To that end, Pastor Elana and I will be baking bread to share in person and to be delivered to anyone local who wishes it - that way, we will all share in one loaf, just as we all share in communion with one Lord, Jesus.

Let us prepare for this communion, remembering the promise of the marvelous meal on the mountain. As Christ's body in the world, we ought to be like the beatitudes, blessing and being blessed as appropriate. Let us respond to God's love through care for each other – for the poor, for the hungry, for the persecuted. Let us comfort the mourning. Let us celebrate the peacemakers, the humble, and the pure in heart. And let us join at the marvelous meal on the mountain!

May you feast at God's table. May Christ lead you to care for your neighbors and acquaintances, inviting them to celebration and food. May the Holy Spirit purify your heart, and encourage your humility, that the Kingdom of Heaven may be established on earth! Amen.