

Isaiah 25:6-9

“Holy Moments”

In his book Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner defines a sacrament in this way, "A sacrament is when something holy happens. It is transparent time, time which you can see through to something deeper inside time." When I read his definition, it brought two pictures to my mind of sacraments past – holy happenings in my own life.

The first moment happened when I was fourteen years old. My home church, John Knox, was in the process of building the current sanctuary. One day I received in the mail an invitation to celebrate Holy Communion. The letter explained that, in order to experience the persecution that the early church of the New Testament lived with, we were to keep the meeting as quiet as possible. Communion would be held in the unfinished basement of the sanctuary, still under construction. We were to arrive quietly, in the dark and to signify our loyalty to the risen Christ by drawing a fish in the dirt with a stick, then wiping away any evidence that we had been there.

To get thirty high school students to be quiet at 11:00 on a Friday night is quite an accomplishment but our Youth Minister did it! We arrived holding candles, silent and somber, and sat in a circle on the South Carolina red clay floor. We passed a loaf of bread and a cup of juice and remembered our God. It was a Holy moment that I will never forget and I believe I saw deep into time – into the past and the very beginning of the Church.

The second moment was years later, when I was a young adult. My husband and I had been married three weeks and had traveled to the lower part of the state for the wedding of my college roommate. Thirty-four years ago, answering machines and cell phones were not the

norm and as we entered our home on our return, the phone was ringing off the hook. A sign of a persistent and repeated called.

That same minister who had served Communion to me in the mud was on the phone. It seemed that Danny's best friend and his wife had had their baby, a little boy named Kevin. Kevin was born with only two chambers in his heart instead of four and was not going to live long. Our friends wanted their baby baptized before he died and wondered if Danny, as an Elder at John Knox, could come to the hospital and represent the Session during the baptism. That baptism was for me another Holy moment. Again – a chance to see deep into time – into the future of our promised resurrection.

Today's Scripture lesson from Isaiah contains the picture of a Holy moment that we can all anticipate - the promise of sharing the heavenly banquet with our Lord and believers from all times. The words are a promise for each one here of what is to come. But they are also a comforting word about the holy table where our loved ones who have gone before us are waiting.

Isaiah first wrote these words to the Israelites in Exile in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem. They were living as foreigners in a strange land, governed by a King who did not know their God, Yahweh. In their time of distress, Isaiah promises that God would destroy the shroud that is cast on all peoples and swallow up death forever. However, in those days, there was no real understanding of death OR of any kind of life *after* death. So the children of God would have thought of death as any power that threatens life – illness, poverty, oppression, judgment, and especially shame - the shame associated with living in Exile. Things that still rob us of life today.

So this would have been a great message of hope to the original audience. Especially since Isaiah presented the promise in terms that they could understand – by giving them a picture

of a great banquet. A time of celebration and fellowship and nourishment – where the body, mind and soul would be fed. And I think this may be the best definition of “church” that we could come up with – where the body, mind and soul can be fed. But the Israelites are promised a lavish meal in Isaiah’s words, truly a feast.

Now we all know how much Presbyterians love to eat so this is a great promise to us too! A Boy Scout troop was once going on a camping weekend and were they were going to be talking about different faiths while they were together so the scout leader asked each boy to bring something that symbolized his own faith to share with others during the weekend. The little Catholic boy brought a set of rosary beads. The little Jewish boy brought a wooden star of David. And the little Presbyterian boy brought a casserole dish!

But the real hope in this passage comes from knowing that the promised banquet will not be about food at all. The people of Isaiah’s day would understand that the meal signified reconciliation and communion with *all* people, a meal where all would come to Zion for instruction and participation in the peace established by the Lord. Imagine their hope and their joy as they anticipated this event. All of God’s people gathered together in their Holy City.

But friends, what makes this story so hopeful to US is that while the Israelites were living on one side of the cross, today as God’s people, we live on the other. They lived on the side that looked FORWARD to a Messiah to deliver them to the Promised Land again. WE live in God’s world where the cross stands empty because the Messiah has lived and died and conquered death.

So our understanding of the meal is of a promise ALREADY FULFILLED and not one to simply look forward to. As modern day Christians, we know that the lavish meal that is served at the banquet is the very body of the child that God sacrificed in brokenness for us all.

We know that the cup that is served is filled with the blood that fell from the hands and feet of Christ, representing every sin that we have committed that has now been forgiven. As we come to the table today, we have the joy of REMEMBERING that Jesus death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection was the holiest moment of all.

But the truth is that this passage holds a promise of future fulfillment for US as well and not just an opportunity to remember. This became evident to me in the very special meal that I shared when I was blessed to travel to Jerusalem a couple of years ago with 30 other friends from this Presbytery. One more Holy Moment that I will tell you about.

As you know, what we call the Holy City is claimed by three groups of God's people all living together today – Christians, Muslims and Jews. While I never felt afraid or intimidated, our differences were apparent, mainly in our dress. Yet, there seemed to be a mutual respect for each other, even in the midst of soldiers with machine guns. Even with the gold Dome of the Rock sitting on top of what was the Temple of Solomon. I always felt sure that our common God was in the midst of us all.

On our last day there, we went to the tomb of Jesus Christ. We sat in the beautiful garden and saw a hill that looked like a skull, Golgotha, as the Scriptures call it. Then in groups of about four, we entered the place where it is believed that Jesus was buried. There is a door on the cave now with a sign that reads, "He is not here. He is Risen."

We left the tomb in awe and went up some steps with the tomb still in our view and sat in rows where Communion had been prepared for us. Each of the six ministers in our group had a part in the worship service that we shared. We began with me singing a capella, "Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this Place" and shared the body and drank the blood from little olive

wood cups. It was the holiest of Holy Moments to me, knowing that God was present, even in the midst of human unrest.

And friends, this meal was a picture of the promised banquet of love in Isaiah that I could see and taste and smell and touch and hear. Every one of my senses felt the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And as I recalled my emotions from that meal, I thought of the promises given by God through the prophet Isaiah. "The LORD of hosts will make for ALL peoples a feast of rich food . . . he will destroy the shroud that surrounds ALL nations . . . He will wipe away tears from ALL faces.

These words are such a picture of harmony and such an affirmation of the Lord's power – even in our world today where the idea that ALL of humankind could really sit at such a meal seems almost impossible. But later, when you hear the words of the Communion Meal, that Jesus said, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lords' death until I come again", I pray that you will remember Isaiah's promise and hear Jesus' claim with new ears.

You see, as often as I have heard and even said these words, recalling the tomb in conjunction with Isaiah's promise gave me a new vision. The vision of ONE MORE HOLY MOMENT when a great banquet table is surrounded by the children of God from ALL times. People that you and I love who have gone to be with God – our husbands, wives, parents, grandparents, children – already waiting for us. People from the great stories in God's word – Isaiah himself with Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Mary Magdalene and Paul. Even people who have not yet known the Lord but whose eyes *will one day be opened* to understand God's grace. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, even Atheists.

In fact, let us dare to hope that even people who we consider our enemies that give us fear for tomorrow can come to know Christ and will then be our brothers and sisters at the Holy Meal. All of God's children, including you and me, at the table of salvation, being served by God himself with His Son at his right hand. What a Holy Moment that will be! A moment when the deepest human hopes for an end to mourning and death itself are realized. And so let us all celebrate today, not only those Holy moments that we remember, but also the ones that we look forward to. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.