

“Scrooge at the Feast”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 55:1-13, Luke 1:46b-55
December 17, 2017 - Third Sunday of Advent

I’ve got food on the brain. Of course, that’s true on most days. But with a big ol’ bake sale about to bust open upstairs and all the wondrous flavors of Advent and Christmas around us, it’s extra hard not to approach scripture with culinary curiosity.

Perhaps you’ve heard the allegory of the long spoons. It’s an ancient tale of unknown origin, and there are versions with slightly different details. In this fable, a wisdom seeker asks to understand the difference between heaven and hell. They are led into a room which has at its center a round table with a pot of deliciously aromatic stew. Around the table are seated people who are gaunt and malnourished and crying out in misery. Each has a spoon with a very long handle strapped to their arm so they cannot bend their elbows. They are able to scoop up the stew with their spoons, but the handles are too long for them to reach their mouths. The guide tells the seeker, “You have seen hell.” The wisdom seeker is then taken into a room set up in precisely the same way — same table, same stew, same spoons — but the people are plump and happy and content. The seeker says, “I don’t understand.” The guide explains: “They learned to feed one another.”

Throughout scripture, one of the best images the divine Word offers for the abundant love of God is the feast. The people of God celebrate with meals, they remember and reenact God’s deeds of power with food, and are continuously concerned with what they will and won’t eat. God prepares tables and brings bread in the desert and calls for festivals. God enjoys nothing more than throwing a dinner party! Jesus is constantly eating with people and talking about food, and he commands us to eat and drink in remembrance of him.

Chapters 40 through 55 of the book of Isaiah seem to correspond roughly with the Babylonian exile we’ve been talking about so much these past few weeks. Chapter 40 starts with “Comfort, O comfort my people…” and continues “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” These are words of abiding love to a people in desperate need of something to hold onto. And here in chapter 55, we get the beginning of the end of the exile section — a closing word of hope to those who have been far from home and feared that all was lost.

It begins with an invitation to come out of the wilderness, take the next exit off the desert roadway, and to drink and eat. There is wine and there is milk here, and it is freely given to you. If you are thirsty, come and drink. If you have no money, come, pick out something and chow down. Delight yourselves in rich food. The table has been set. God is throwing a feast.

The table is set and your nose can barely contain the excitement it’s trying to express to your mouth. This is going to be epic! A Christmas meal is before you: Roast turkey or goose or glazed ham. Meatballs — Italian, Swedish, or otherwise. Sweet potatoes. Clam chowder or oyster stew. Dressing made just right. Greens and broccoli casserole and beans and parsnips and potatoes and onions. Gingerbread and mulled wine and Christmas pudding and custards and pies.

Come to the feast that God has set to celebrate an everlasting covenant of steadfast love. Come to the feast so that you may *live* — live, like the dry bones in the valley Ezekiel prophesied to last Sunday! Live, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the week before. Come and live and eat and listen and be satisfied!

It's an irresistible invitation. And yet God is concerned, because we seem to have shown up with our hands full. The Israelites had done as they were told by the prophet Jeremiah: they reworked their faith to survive in exile, they made a home in Babylon, they succeeded. They made it work. And along the way, they became part of the greed and anxiety and violence of the empire in order to make it. They had picked up some bad habits —ones their ancestors had known well. And so the invitation comes, but with it questions: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Why are you holding onto things that fail to bring you closer to what you really want?

God beckons the people to the table, but also tells them "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." Give up these nasty habits of oppression. You know what I ask. Care for the vulnerable. Return to me. Drop the trappings of the empire from your clenched fists, or you won't even be able to pick up a spoon.

There is this scrumptious feast prepared, but we amble up to our place setting with sacks of stuff filling our hands. Yeah, it's stuff we ordered from Amazon that neither we nor those on our gift lists really need. But it's also all the useless stuff we pick up at work, or on Facebook, or sometimes even at church. It's the self-worth we calculate based on other people's comments and it's the self-loathing we accumulate trying to be perfect and it's the anxiety we collect like souvenir spoons. It's the anger we squeeze so tightly until it transforms into a perfect, sparkly grudge diamond.

One day in first grade my mom dressed me in a plaid button-down shirt that I for some reason decided was incredibly uncool. (Coolness would continue evade me for the next 32 years, three months, seven days, two hours, eleven minutes, and 34...35...) When I arrived at school, my teacher, Mrs. Robinson, asked me to remove my jacket and put it in the closet. I refused. I stomped my feet. I balled my little fists up and cried so hard I shook. I would not let go of my misplaced pride and fear and conviction that I, Joey, was right. I got in a lot of trouble that day, which was totally not my style. And I made a fool of myself. And I missed out.

You have seen adults behave similarly, just in slightly more age-appropriate ways. We are capable of missing out on all sorts of things because we won't open our hands and accept the gift being offered. Have you ever showed up for a party or a dinner or some other event absolutely determined to not have a good time? Someone might've ask what's wrong, and you replied "nothing!" and somehow through the magic of the English language that "nothing" rhymed with "Bah! Humbug"

And so God's invitation is not just to come to the table of the feast of life, but to let go of some things so as to be able to eat and enjoy and live. Release the stuff we're gripping so tightly so that our hands might be free to receive and to share and to pass the gravy. Trust the promised abundance. Trust that what God is offering is life-giving and see if you can shed some of what is life-diminishing. And no, you can't make a plate and go watch Hulu. This isn't a solo feast. God needs us, together, so that the Word of God

will not be returned empty, but accomplish what it came to do in the world.

And what the Word of God came to do is no secret. Mary knew. She sang it in Elizabeth's kitchen! The two pregnant women must have been dancing. Elizabeth had just felt John-who-would-be-the-Baptizer leap in her womb and so she proclaimed "Blessed are you among women!" And now Mary replies, "My soul magnifies the Lord! And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...the Might One has done great things...Mercy! Strength! Scattered the proud! Brought down the powerful! Lifted up the lowly! Filled the hungry with good things! Sent the rich away empty!" And they danced in the kitchen, for the table had been set.

We are in the home stretch here on the Third Sunday of Advent. The Fourth Sunday comes next week, but it will only be a few hours before the angels burst forth in song and the shepherds are running and all heaven has broken loose in Bethlehem.

It's coming. God's gonna God, no matter what you do. The rain and the snow come down and water the earth, sprouting the seed before returning to the sky. God's Word will come and do its thing, ready or not. This child is going to be born, and it's going to change everything. And maybe the only way it impacts you is the way you decorate and the amount of stress you carry. But the invitation is to a greater feast, in which good things spring up and signs are seen and contemplated and you see that there is enough and you dig in with both hands and open your eyes and ears and hands and nose and mouth and heart to creation shouting good news and announcing a glorious feast:

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Amen.