

March 8th: The Prophetic Table

Welcome once again to our Lenten series, At The Table–this is a time of year when Christians around the globe focus on spiritual renewal, repentance, and growing in our faith. This year, we’re not asking you to give up anything–we’re asking you to consider adding something to your life. That could be daily prayer, weekly devotions, trying a new form of community service, or whatever else adds fresh insight and depth to your journey. One powerful thing that you can add to your routines is more time at the table–more time with family and friends gathered around food you love and love to share.

Before we meditate on this passage together, I invite you to pray with me.

Prophetic God, you have given us these words of hope to lead us out of dark seasons and difficult times. You have shared this wisdom with us so that we might not grow weary and give into despair. Comfort our bodies, minds, and spirits this morning with your powerful grace and abundant provision. Gather us together in your name, so that we might eat, drink, and be satisfied. In your name we pray, Amen.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Heather asked how many of you had eaten breakfast before arriving to church–and today, I have another food related question for you:

If you were having a hard day or a difficult week, and someone offered to cook you a meal of your favorite comfort food–what would that be? What dish would lift your spirits and bring you some much needed joy? Is it a food from your childhood? Is it that easy meal you learned to prepare for your kids? What food would most feed your soul when you needed that extra bit of love and care?

For me, my comfort food is probably a good old fashioned box of mac and cheese. Yes, the kind with neon orange cheese–I know it’s not real cheese but that does not matter when I’m shoveling it in my mouth straight from the

saucepan. It may not be particularly nutritious, but I think there's just something special and cozy about a big bowl of cheesy noodles, it makes me feel all warm inside. Or maybe it would be the snack that my aunt made for me when I was younger—warmed up tortillas, slathered with butter, then sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. It doesn't sound like much, but I promise the outcome is greater than the sum of its parts—plus it would bring me right back to being in her sunny kitchen and the calming sound of her voice.

Why does this happen? Why do certain foods have the power to create these emotions? Why do some meals and dishes bring us so much physical and emotional happiness while others do not?

Well, as we all know, food is more than just fuel for our bodies. It's more than just calories that we take in and then use for our daily activities. If food was just a biological necessity, we would all be drinking nutritional shakes or eating giant blocks of plain tofu—but we're not. Or at least, I'm not.

And that's because we know that food has a greater purpose, and real power. From the very beginning of our human history food has been central to collective story. Food is a gift that God gave humanity in the garden. Food is a sign of freedom. Food is hospitality prepared for friends and strangers. Food is fellowship that brings together entire communities. Food is tradition, passed down from generation to generation. Food is culture transmitted across space and time. Food is sacrifice, evidence of the hard work of planting, watering, harvesting, and cooking. Food carries so much meaning that we don't always stop to notice: it reminds us who we are, which family we come from, which values are important to us, and which memories we are holding onto. Food is an embodied experience—it uses all of our senses to immerse us in this act of eating, connecting, and sharing. Food brings us together in ways that very few things can—because it's so essential to both our survival and our spirituality.

Today we're looking at a biblical meal that addresses both our physical needs and our spiritual ones—a meal that offers us both an answer to our bodily

hunger and the deep craving for justice that resides inside of each of us. Before we take a closer look at our passage, here's the larger biblical context.

As one of the most important prophetic texts of the Old Testament, Isaiah is a book that holds so many complicated emotions: condemnation for injustice, righteous anger for the oppressed, grief for God's wayward people, and deep hope for the future. In Isaiah's 66 chapters, we get the whole range of the human experience—from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows. In the beginning of Isaiah's writings, the nation of Judah is going through severe upheaval and potential invasion, and by the middle of the book, God's people have been conquered and transported to Babylon, where they will live in exile for generations. These are dark times, filled with fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and loss. And at every stage and in every season, our prophet looks to God for comfort and guidance. And because of this, there's also faithfulness, the joy of being in God's presence, and trust in God's promises—this holds a small remnant of God's people together.

This particular chapter is right in the middle of what some scholars and theologians call "the Isaiah apocalypse," the time when the kingdom of Judah is falling apart and our biblical author is imagining what the future will hold. In this section of Isaiah's prophetic writings, he is given this vision of a sweeping battle between the forces of good and evil, culminating with a final victory and all of God's people worshipping together on Mount Zion. This is what we hear at the beginning of chapter 25, Isaiah describes the aftermath of this chaos by singing, "You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners' stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt. Therefore strong peoples will honor you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you."

Isaiah goes on to say that this will be a great cause for celebration among the poor, needy, and those who have suffered at the hands of the ruthless. All of these oppressed and marginalized people will gather together on the mountaintop, ready to rejoice in their protection and peace. Isaiah imagines this scene: "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich

food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth.”

If you listen closely, this passage is certainly a study in contrasts—we have imagery of brutal destruction right next to a few verses about a lavish feast of the finest foods. We hear about the death of God’s enemies, but we also hear that God “swallows up death forever.” In this context, God is both a refuge for those in need, and a force of annihilation for those who are in opposition to God’s kingdom. Isaiah prophesies that the unrighteous will suffer, but the people on the mountain top will have every tear wiped away. God promises famine and hunger on some, but extravagant hospitality and care to others.

It can be hard to reconcile this prophetic vision with what we already believe about God and his love for all people—I get it. But Isaiah doesn’t seem to have a problem with claiming that not everyone will get to experience this mountaintop moment. In fact, it brings him comfort to know that there is some kind of punishment promised to those who are evil. Like really, truly, deeply evil, not just the people who didn’t use their turn signal when they should have or the ones who cut in line at the pharmacy. It brings him comfort to know that the cruel oppressors, the greedy and exploitative rulers, the warmongers, and the unjust business tycoons will not win in the end.

Isaiah trusts that there is some kind of cosmic justice that will happen, and this justice will make everything right with the world. And out of this belief comes a sense of peace for him that he might not otherwise have been able to cultivate in such a dark time in his nation’s history. He can navigate the discomfort and destruction that is happening in his own life because he has this vision of a future table to guide him. He can live through injustice and poverty because he knows that abundance and victory have been promised. He can deal with famine and upheaval, because there is this prophetic answer

to the hunger that is inside of him. He can be faithful, because there is a table waiting for him.

With the way that our world is right now—war looming, injustices happening everywhere, rampant poverty—I think some of us can relate to Isaiah’s need for comfort. I think many of us right now—the people on fixed incomes, the non-billionaires, the disabled, the immigrants, the queer folks—we know what it is like to need something to hold onto when times are tough. You need that hope, you need something worth living for. You need that comfort of a brighter future in order to survive today. I know that I need that too—I need a vision for something greater that allows me to transcend my current anxieties and struggles. I need a prophecy that isn’t just for my body, but for my soul too.

And that’s why I think this passage is so powerful and timely—because I think many of us feel like we can turn to comfort food to satisfy our bodies, but we don’t have an answer for that deeper hunger for justice. Perhaps we keep trying to solve our spiritual cravings with man made tools, instead of looking to God for guidance and reassurance. Perhaps we cling to temporary comforts as a way to soothe our souls, instead of reminding ourselves of God’s promise. Perhaps we look to other humans for answers, instead of turning to the divine.

That’s why Isaiah offers us this vision of God’s table. And here’s what he wants us to know:

The prophetic table is a table of comfort. The prophetic table is a table that invites the worn out and wounded to relax and receive nourishment. The prophetic table is a table that soothes broken hearts and hurting spirits with the sustenance that they need to keep going. The prophetic table is a table of ultimate victory, but it’s also a table of vulnerability and relief. The prophetic table brings together the lost, the disenfranchised, the weak, the outcast, and creates a place where their whole person is welcomed and celebrated. It’s where you can breathe deep, unclench your jaw, and let your shoulders sink down. It’s where you can wipe your tears, release the tension that sits like a pit in your stomach, and let go of the constant anxiety.

We may be afraid, we may be uncertain about the future, but God's prophetic table will satisfy all of our needs and fulfill all of our longings.

But I would be remiss if I didn't mention that this passage doesn't just call us into comfort—it also presents a challenge for all of us who desire to follow God and bring justice to our world. Yes, we are God's guests at the future table on Mount Zion, but we are also like Isaiah—people who are navigating our own complex lives and cultures of despair. And like our prophet, we have the power to say something and do something—we have voices to raise and visions to cast. It may not always feel like it, but we can speak up and call out the wrongs in our world. We can respond to the distress and despair in our communities with words of hope and actions of hospitality—we can share these words and offer a sense of belonging that wins out over our human brokenness and destruction. If we are hungry for justice, we have to turn that hunger into action.

We may not be at the table that God has promised in this text, but we do have tables right here and now that we can use to be places where our communities can experience God's prophetic comfort. We have this table, the communion table, that reminds us each month that we are drawn together as one people, united by our thirst for peace and wholeness. We have tables in this sanctuary, where you can meet a new friend or deepen an existing relationship that might bring joy and meaning to your life. You have tables in your homes where you could welcome family and friends to share in foods and fellowship that buoy your soul. Every table in a restaurant or coffee shop could be a place where hope grows and God's goodness is experienced. Every meal could be an opportunity to invite the marginalized or make room for the lost and lonely. Every plate is a chance to serve the less fortunate or answer our truest cravings.

I'd like to close this meditation by reading for us a few stanzas from the classic hymn, "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People," a song which I think speaks to this text and offers us some wisdom. I hope these words can be a guidepost for you as you enter a new week.

Here's verses 3 and 4:

For the herald's voice is crying
In the desert far and near,
Bidding all to true repentance,
Since the kingdom now is here.
Oh, that warning cry obey,
Now prepare for God a way;
Let the valleys rise to meet him,
And the hills bow down to greet him.

Make ye straight what long was crooked,
Make the rougher places plain;
Let your hearts be true and humble,
As befits His holy reign;
For the glory of the Lord
Now o'er earth is shed abroad,
And all flesh shall see the token
That his Word is never broken.

My friends, hear the good news of God's comforting, prophetic table: His word is never broken. Amen.