

Sermon Preached in Class (October 8) and at Christ Church Georgetown (CXM Site, October 11)
Proper 23, Year A (T. 1): **Isaiah 25:1-9**; Psalm 23; Matthew 22:1-14; Philippians 4:1-9
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Focus Statement: Experiences of Beauty (like the ones Isaiah depicts) give us an indication of what a more Just future can be like, and allow us a picture by which to work toward that Future.

Sermon—10.11.20
Isaiah 25:1-9

I go outside at night a good bit. I'll go on walks, sit on a bench somewhere, sneak into the chapel on campus. A few times I've even woken up in the middle of the night and gone outside just to see what the moon looked like.¹ In some ways, nighttime feels volatile, and it certainly can be. But for me, the nighttime, for all its monsters around the corner, is the best time of day. The sky is a mix of navy's and purples, and things are quiet. There's a sort of holiness about it that'll catch your breath if you're ready for it. For me at night, the world *as it is* and the world *as it can be* seem to line up for a moment. The world is, in a way, *set right*.

I want to speak this morning about Isaiah's vision of Justice. If we were to characterize the passage in one way, it would be this: a depiction of the world set right. But we can't only speak about Justice in Isaiah; we also have to acknowledge the *way* Isaiah describes this vision. That is, we have to talk about Beauty, too. Isaiah doesn't lay out precepts, he doesn't write in long treatises or (maybe) even a sermon. Isaiah's vision requires an act of imagination and figuration. To make something known which hasn't yet come to pass—this is the task of a Biblical prophet, and through analogy, simile, poetry (whatever the prophet has in his arsenal) this future becomes a little more intelligible. Here, Justice and Beauty meet to articulate the world set right. And this is, after all, what Justice means: the world as it should be. But more on this in a moment.

The Israelites spent much of their life occupied by a foreign power. The Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Romans. It's seems like, in a way, the people of God just bounced from subjugator to subjugator.

¹ Jorie Graham, *Materialism* (Hopewell: The Ecco Press, 1993), 12: "The knife, a felled birch left overnight/ for tomorrow's work on which the moonlight, in the eyes of no one, plays, gleaming, the knife sits awaiting the emptiness it will make appear where all along there had been emptiness implied."

Sometimes, however, the Israelites *are* set free. This is where we pick up today in our passage. “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.” Isaiah goes on, “For *you* have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress.” Against some foreign power, Israel takes refuge in a more fortified God. In the words of our Psalm today, “Your rod and your staff *they* comfort me;/ *you set a table* before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5-6).

So, we begin to see Isaiah what Isaiah sees: the world set right. More specifically in this passage, the world is set right *for Israel*. We can open up our definition of Justice just a bit. Justice means also *making right what has been made wrong*. In the case of the Israelites, this means redemption from occupation, and the destruction of a foreign palace. We are a good bit of distance from an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That’s certainly *one* strand of Biblical Justice, but there’s a deeper, more future-oriented sense that runs through the Biblical witness. Justice also means to make *right* what has been made *wrong*—restoring relationships and circumstances to their proper way of life.² To tip my hand, “Then the LORD GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,” says Isaiah.

Suddenly at v. 6 the verb tense shifts. In the blink of an eye, we move from past to future. Where once we were recounting the works which God *has* done, suddenly, we are stretching, longing for the works which God *will* do. And this vision includes far more than just Israel: “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.” This is gorgeous language. Even in English, we get a sense that this is the banquet of all banquets. Not only is the world set right but it is set *exceedingly* right; the future *abounds* in mercy, *overflows* with good things, things like wines, marrow, rich foods—not customary dinners for an oppressed and subjugated people. Here is a key element of prophetic speech: the anticipation of the future.

In the beginning, I mentioned that we should attend not only to the *content* of the vision, but the *way* in which Isaiah delivers this vision—we have to talk about Beauty. We miss a great deal when we skip over the

² Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 133-137.

eruption of metaphor in the latter half of this text. What began with a simple exaltation now jumps into all sorts of images: a banquet with innumerable guests, the removal of a burial shroud, death *swallowed up* forever. I want to contend that the future is *inaccessible* without these images. Through images like the banquet, *we can see this future*. For Isaiah, metaphor becomes the means of reaching into the future, and breaking off a piece to look at in our hands.

Not only that, but the Beauty of these images gives us an indication as to what this future will *be* like, and this is crucial: for Isaiah to depict a banquet, an inexhaustible feast, is likewise to desire that some sort of similar life be known *in the present*. The future *is* like a banquet; it *is* like the removal of a burial shroud; it *is*, ever so slightly, like sneaking into the chapel at night.

I promised earlier that Beauty and Justice are working together in Isaiah. This is how: just like Isaiah's metaphors, every beautiful moment gives us a taste of what a Just future may be like. And *every* beautiful moment, I mean—an altar, the look of someone we love, the first picture we take without our braces, a harbor near sunset, or a sip of well-aged wine.

There's a tremendous passage from Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* which springs to mind. In the novel, an aging minister, John Ames, begins to write letters to his son, who is unlikely to remember very much of his father, because the son is so young. In one vignette, the father recounts his son's first communion. He writes, and I'll quote at length:

[Once], when almost everyone had left and the elements were still on the table and the candles still burning, your mother brought you up the aisle to me and said, "You ought to give him some of that." You're too young, of course, but she was completely right. Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. Your solemn and beautiful child face lifted up to receive these mysteries at my hands. They are the most wonderful mystery, body and blood.

It was an experience I might have missed.

The light in the room was beautiful this morning, as it often is.”³

When this is our life—when the Sacrament unfolds unto the world itself, when the memory of a communion *rolls* into a gorgeous morning—then we are beginning to see the relationship between Justice and Beauty. Each beautiful moment stirs in us a longing for the world to be *just like that*. Each touches upon the boundary between a future and a present: the moment we are in, and the moment would like to see come about. Beauty and Justice are both alike, in that they, *both* call out to us; they both ask for our response. Both have a way of getting us to *hum along*.⁴

In the case of Isaiah, this call ripples out from the future.⁵ The rightness of the world—the banquet we do know—calls out for the rightness still to be done—the banquet we *can* know. As one author writes, “To be just is to think that there is still more ‘just’ to be found or understood. To be just is to think that justice has yet to be done, that it can always demand more, always go further.”⁶ So, Isaiah offers us this opportunity: to wipe the tears from each other’s faces, provide shade on a scorching afternoon, to pull up always another chair to the table. Can you imagine a world in which we *do* this? When we *do* wipe the tears from each other’s faces; when we *do* provide shade on a scorching afternoon; when we *do* pull up, always, another chair to the table. *This* is a beautiful world, and it is only the *beginning*. My friends, there’s always a just future asking something of us, always a life just over the edge. In the words of John Ames, “it was an experience I might have missed.”

In close, here is Isaiah’s commendation: Love the Lord your God; love the world in which you found God; and love the world to come. Love them so much that you cannot help but make them known, cannot help but *hum along*.

³ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 69-70.

⁴ Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 9.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 23: “The first “vision” of eschatology...reveals the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of totality, the possibility of a *signification without a context*.”

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *God, Justice, Love, Beauty*, trans. Sarah Clift (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 48.

Amen.