



## **The Best Banquet**

**Isaiah 25:6-9**

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November 4, 2018

**All Saints Sunday**

CONNECT  GROW  SERVE

*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.*

*And God will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations.  
God will swallow up death forever.*

*Then the Lord God will wipe away  
the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of God's people God will take away  
from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.*

*It will be said on that day,  
Lo, this is our God;  
we have waited for God,  
so that God might save us.*

*This is the Lord for whom we have waited.  
Let us be glad and rejoice in God's salvation.*

Isaiah 25:6-9

John Ormond describes the men who built the great churches of Europe in his poem, *The Cathedral Builders*: They climbed on sketchy ladders towards God, with winch and pulley hoisted hewn rock into heaven, inhabited the sky with hammers, defied gravity, deified stone, took up God's house to meet him,

and came down to their suppers and small beer,  
every night slept,  
lay with their smelly wives,  
quarreled and cuffed the children,  
lied, spat, sang, were happy, or unhappy,  
and every day took to the ladders again,  
impeded the rights of way of another summer's swallows,  
grew grayer, shakier,  
saw naves sprout arches,  
clerestories soar,  
cursed the loud fancy glaziers for their luck,  
somehow escaped the plague,  
got rheumatism,  
decided it was time to give it up,  
to leave the spire to others,  
stood in the crowd,  
well back from the vestments at the consecration,  
envied the fat bishop his warm boots,  
cocked a squint eye aloft, and said,  
"I bloody did that"

(John Ormond, "Cathedral Builders," *Good Poems*, New York: Penguin, 2002, 356).

On All Saints Day we remember saints who climbed shaky ladders toward God, who were smelly and quarrelsome, who lied and sang, and who took up God's house to meet God. On this day, we give thanks for the famous and the anonymous, who laughed and cried, and went to parties and funerals. All Saints Day is given to gratitude, as we remember those who came before us, and to joy as we look forward to the hope we share.

Five hundred years before Christ, the poet Isaiah has been through the destruction of his beloved Jerusalem, the

cruelty of the Babylonians, and the pain of exile far from home, but when he cocks a squint eye aloft and looks off in the distance he sees lights on a mountain. As he moves closer he hears a swing band and people laughing. Then he catches a whiff of barbecue.

Isaiah writes, “God is going to throw a blowout of a party to end all parties—a feast of the finest foods and vintage wines, seven courses, each more scrumptious than the last, a feast lavish with gourmet desserts.”

No tofu, no sushi, nothing reduced fat, no flavor-gutted lite anything will be served. This will not be the kind of banquet for which you look for an excuse, but the kind you mark on your calendar in red ink. You will be with people you love and in no hurry to leave. In fact you will lose all track of time. Parties do not get any better than this one.

And chew on this, the mouth-watering feast the prophet describes is still only a pale comparison to what is to come, because God’s party will go on forever. God will swallow death and wipe away every tear. No one will weep anymore because the feast of life will never end.

None of us will have to pay for our ticket to the bash. God’s taking care of everything. The best part is the guest list. Everybody is invited—young and old, good and bad, and upper crust and bottom dweller. Anybody who wants to come can have a place at the table.

At first glance some of the guests look out of place. You have to look carefully to see that they are saints. Jacob who cheated his brother, his father, and tried repeatedly to cheat his God is leaning against the bar. As always he is trying to take more than his share, but they

will not run out of wine. King David, who cheated enough people to make Bernie Madoff blush, is dancing before God again—and this time David's wearing clothes. Rahab, whose profession does not get mentioned in Sunday school, learned to hip hop somewhere along the way.

It is quite a crowd. For the first time in her life Leah feels like the belle of the ball. John the Baptist is eating something tastier than his normal fare. Martha is not worried about the dishes. Naomi is holding hands with her long-lost husband.

Saint Francis has birds fluttering around his head and is, as usual, barefoot. It is hard to tell if he is dancing with his pet wolf or Joan of Arc. Joan led men twice her size into battle, but she cannot get Francis' attention. She should consider wearing something other than armor. St. Christopher has his robe hitched up around his knees and his hands around the feet of the child who is dancing on his back.

Some of those on the dance floor are famous, but we have never heard of most of them. St. Maximillian, the first conscientious objector, was drafted by the Roman army, but refused to serve, because his only loyalty was to God's army. At his beheading, Maximillian noticed the shabby clothing of his executioner, and asked that his own clothes be given to the man (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, Boston: Cowley, 1999, 208-209). Max is now wearing an Armani tuxedo.

A table near the front is so long it seems like it never ends. The sign says, "Reserved for Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York." Twenty-one New Englanders—including the Tappans and Taskers—are talking about the

day in 1847 when they bought the Presbyterians' building and started Plymouth Church.

Henry Ward Beecher and his sister Harriet are there. Henry is clearing his throat, just in case someone asks him to make a speech. He loves making speeches. Harriet sees that Rose "Pinky" Ward's glass is empty so she pours her another. Harriet fills the glasses of about a dozen people who came through the Grand Central Depot of the Underground Railroad.

Mark Twain comes to check on his shipmates from *Innocents Abroad*. Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Frederick Douglass drop by. Charles Beecher and the organist John Zundel are talking about songs they might sing. Jon Arbuckle is walking around with a coffee pot, offering a cup to Branch Rickey, Donald Othmer, Nancy Morgan, Mary Ann Yancey, and Dennis Trott.

The party is going strong, but they are also waiting. Calligraphied place cards save the seats of guests yet to arrive. Some saints have had reserved spots at the Plymouth table for more than forty years—Edith Bartley, Grace Faison, Valerie Louzonis, and Dick Yancey.

Amy Talcott is looking for typos in the menu. Julia Rassmann is collecting cans for the food drive. Bruce Oelschlager is rehearsing the anthem. Erica Cooper is looking for newcomers to make sure they feel welcome. John Scibilia is figuring out what it is all going to cost.

Caroline Koster is baking a cherry pie. Elizabeth Snypes is in the Thrift Store helping someone look for a coat to wear. Rob and Katie Bundy are going through their list of friends to find someone else to invite to Plymouth. Vicki Francis is giving instructions to the

ushers. Nancy Trott is taking the opportunity to recruit volunteers for the shelter. Lee Scott is still handing out buttons to *Save the Promenade*. Jacque Jones is lighting candles. Sally Larsen is arranging flowers.

While all of this is going on, everything is being prepared. There is a party after church. We live in hope of the day when the tears will be wiped away and there will be an end to pain and suffering. We live in hope that one day we will learn to live and party together in ways that build up and do not tear down. We will trust each other completely, because we will know even as we are fully known. We will stand in awe of something far greater than any of us. We will feast as brothers and sisters at God's table. We live and grieve and love like those who are on their way to an amazing party.

Jesus picks up on Isaiah's promise of a feast and tosses it right into the middle of this worship service. Jesus says that we are the people that God will gather on the mountain around the table. When we break bread together on this side of the celebration, we do so believing that this Lord's Supper is the *hors d'oeuvres*, the foretaste of glory divine, and the appetizer for heaven's banquet.

When we take this bread and cup we remember our place at the party. We share a banquet promised long before we got here, a feast that will last all eternity. The table is set. The wine is poured.

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*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

