

THIS IS OUR GOD! - November 1, 2015 (North Church members serving at Crossroads)

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-10 (9)

No UNISON: Stewardship message

HYMNS: 1) #299 For all the Saints 2) #298 O Savior, for the Saints 3) #20 God of Abraham and Sarah

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Look, here is our God, the One we have waited for.

People: Let us be glad and rejoice in our salvation.

L: Enjoy the blessings of our Lord, the vindication from our God.

P: Come! Let us worship the Lord.

INVOCATION & LORD'S PRAYER

God of new beginnings, you are the beginning and end of all things. Remove the shroud that separates us from your mighty presence, so that we may see you as you are. Wipe away our tears and take away our disgrace, so that we may come before your throne with hearts full of song and souls ablaze with joy. Our hearts belong to you, O Lord; hear us as we pray: "Our Father..."

SERMON

I love this text. This is one of my favorites from the Old Testament. I have a Hamsa pendant, the Jewish symbol for the hand of God, and when I wear it I think of this hopeful passage: the **hand of God will rest upon this mountain.**

This is a prophetic text from the time when the Jews were in exile in Babylon. This word was given to God's people not at a point when they imagined this feast being described as another wonderful thanksgiving dinner, another chance to get the family together, but at a point in time when they were an overcome, defeated people. The older ones had seen the end of their

nation, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the invading force of Babylon. They had been carried away to that land, where they lived as foreigners, servants, slaves...exiles. They had lost the Promised Land, because they had not heeded God's commands and God's promises. They lived daily with their disgrace, and watched their children adapt to this new life, this strange life, and wondered if their grandchildren would remember God. The Jews in exile all worried that they had lost the covenant that God made with their ancestors at Sinai, the promise that God would be their God and they would be God's people. **They were people struggling with being hopeful, because their hopes had all been dashed, and whatever lay ahead of them did not resemble—could not resemble-- what had once been.**

That was the mood of the Jews in Babylon....and sometimes, it's our mood too. **It is no news flash that our world is changing rapidly.** New technologies have made human beings able to do almost anything....but our ethical reflection and reasoning is far behind our ability to act, so that the questions, "is this a good idea?" and "who will be helped or harmed?" only arise as afterthoughts. Our global engagement means new pressures, the interaction of new cultures, and the awkwardness that can bring. Things we once held dear seem to have been sidelined. **So it's no surprise that many people feel strong resistance to change, and turn instead to glorified recollections of the past. "If only we'd known!" and "Where is our God?" we cry, much like the Jews in Babylon.**

The Exile was a disaster for the Jews. They lost the Promised Land! The old ways were lost and gone forever! **But it was also an important learning experience.** In the midst of all the things they'd lost, they did NOT lose God. In an interesting way, they really FOUND God in the midst of an upsetting, unsettling time. Instead of sacrificing at the temple they turned to observance of the Law, given to them at Sinai in another time of wandering and uncertain future. In Babylon, what we know today as the Torah was put together. And in Babylon, God sent them messages through the prophets of the Isaiah school, messages that their enemies would be destroyed, messages that they would not endure God's anger forever. **And then in chapter 25, Isaiah unveils this amazing image, this amazing piece of hope that God can be – and is already-- with them WHEREVER THEY ARE.** Wherever they call upon God's name.

This is hope for us too. **This has always been the hope of God's people: that God is present among them, forgiving their trespasses, leading them towards the promised time when all that is wrong is made right again.** And we have even more: we know that God not only rests a hand on the mountain, but walks it with us and sits down to teach us and dine with us. We know that Christ has led us and been sacrificed for us and given us a way to join the faithful of all ages in a sacred meal – communion-- and in that time of communion, we are reminded again that **the funeral coverings, the shroud of death, will not always be over us, that we will be safe and fed and loved, and that God will be our God and we will be God's people forever.**

It is so hopeful. But hope can be a tricky thing. It can be false. It can be misplaced. It can speak of resolution that is too far off for us to see. And it can really mess with our own plans! **“The energy of hope will always scramble the sensible plots we construct to narrate our lives” (Jay Emerson Johnson)** This is because the energy of hope comes from God, not from us. When we place our trust in that hope from God....it will come to pass, it will not abandon us, but it will also not allow us to bypass the times of hard testing.

Today, November 1, can be seen in several different ways. For almost all the Christian church, it's **All Saints Day**, when we celebrate those whose faithful lives have surely caused them to gain heaven. They are already sitting at that table on that mountain, enjoying the heavenly banquet. For some Christians the saints are examples; for others, particularly in the Catholic tradition, they are intercessors, taking prayers offered to them straight to God's ear. For everyone, they are hopeful signs...except for all that sainthood martyrdom, the being pierced with arrows like St. Sebastian, or tortured like St. Catherine and many more. Except for the utter humility and self-sacrifice that marks the life stories of St. Francis or Catherine of Siena or Mother Teresa. One of the commonalities of the lives of saints was that none of them started with sainthood as their goal. They did not set out to do this. But God got into their heads and their hearts and changed their lives. Pushed them out to do God's work in the world, and to be a living witness to God's redeeming love and grace. In the process they discovered that even the stability of this life is nothing compared to the home that we all have in God's love. **The hope of the saints was in God's very being, rather than in any earthly experience or event, any human characteristic or practice. And our hope is that we can also be those people who hear God's call and respond in faith.**

Today is also **Reformation Sunday**. In 1517, Martin Luther, a German Catholic monk, became alarmed at the practices of his church leadership—practices that made it seem that God's forgiveness could be bought and sold, and practices that held the threat of eternal damnation over the heads of the people unless they obeyed the church. This distorted behavior of the clergy - people who were sworn to walk in Jesus' footsteps - offended Luther's theological mind, and in an attempt to reform the church, he wrote 99 theses—that is, proposals, for change. Not surprisingly, the bishop was not interested in reading these or even receiving the document, so on October 31st, 1517, Martin Luther went to the Castle Church, in Wittenberg, Saxony, and NAILED those proposals to the church door. It was a protest, and one that inspired others to speak out with their own objections to the practices and theology of the Catholic Church, and eventually to form an alternative Christian body, the Protestant churches. **Among these others were Zwingli and Calvin, who lifted up new, provocative ideas. Ideas that said scripture was the decisive resource for God's people, and that people needed to read it and apply it to their lives. Ideas about how churches might be organized, with more power given to the people, and a less exalted, more relational role for the clergy. Does this sound familiar?**

It should! People from all over Europe heard and read these Reformed ideas about the church. Among those were a group of exiles who had been forced out of England when Queen Mary re-established Catholicism there. As they read the Bible, no longer only in Latin but translated into many languages so that all could understand, they saw how the early Christian church was organized, how it was governed by the congregation, and came back to Elizabethan England with a new idea for **a new kind of Protestant church—a purified fellowship. These Puritans, as they came to be called, envisioned a Congregational church.** Now, for many protestant churches, today is the time when they celebrate this transformation of the Body of Christ; but we in the American Congregational tradition will celebrate most greatly right before Thanksgiving as we recall the risks taken, the hardships endured, the dangers faced as those early embattled Congregationalists, the Pilgrims and Puritans, came to North America.

So here we are! A bunch of Congregationalists, out of the Reformed tradition, believing that there are saints among us, committed to worshipping God and serving humanity. To that end, North Church folks are worshipping here and working at Crossroads today. **We are doing good works not to earn God’s love and forgiveness and salvation but because those things have already been given to us, and this is how we respond in grateful love.** Like our forefathers and foremothers we sometimes struggle to live with hope and trust in God, **a hope that sustains us, and challenges us, and messes up our tidy plans.** We live with the hope and expectation that God will act, and that even our hard times, our anxieties, and our stumbling efforts will bear fruit in the end, although we have no idea how it will all turn out. This hope, that nobody and nothing can take away, invites us to say, “This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

In this hope, we worship and serve, and we share what we have, our resources, the work of our hands and hearts. We hope for the restoration of our world: where everyone will have enough to eat and a place to live. Where people won’t strive violently against one another. Where we will all really understand and practice love for our neighbor—in the knowledge that ALL of God’s children, all people, are neighbors to us. **It is not always an easy thing, following Jesus, walking with hope in the pathway he’s made for us.** We will be challenged to give up some old ways to make room for the new thing God is doing. We will be convicted in our hearts of the ways we serve ourselves instead of others. We will experience discomfort. And we will discover love, grace, compassion, reconciliation and all the other fruits of the Spirit that God intends for our lives.

So once again, let's hear these words of incredible hope—the impossible made possible for us by the loving, grace-filled action of God, Father, Son and Spirit:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he 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 him, so that he might save us.
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God, now and forevermore. Amen.