

Yr. A, Proper 23
October 11, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1571 Words

Lessons: Isaiah 25:1-9
Psalm 23
Philippians 4:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

I used to like surprises—plot twists in stories and movies, interesting encounters and travels, unexpected letters and phone calls.

After I was ordained, I changed my mind. I've now qualified my original statement—I like pleasant surprises! Especially this year, I'm pretty sure we are all on the same page. A little stability, predictability, and—goodness, even boredom—might go a long way to salve our wounds.

Still, I want you to meet my favorite prophet, Isaiah. He's full of surprises. Remember last week how he imagined God as a vine grower and his nation as the vineyard? Like any good vintner, God put heart and soul into those vines—the best soil, the best care, the best of everything for that nation. Yet, in return, the LORD only received sour grapes.

“What more could I have done?” God wonders. It was reasonable for the LORD to expect the fruit of justice for all the people, but instead there was violence. It was reasonable for the LORD to expect the fruit of a peaceable nation, but instead the poor and vulnerable cried out for help.

Isaiah imagines God, heartbroken with disappointment, just abandoning the effort to the wild animals and briars and thorns. That prophesy in chapter 5 explains a lot about what happened to Israel—how it was overrun by Assyria, torn apart and scattered into exile.

Those to whom much is given, much is required—or at least expected by God to yield fruitfulness which blesses all of God's children. I don't like the surprise in last week's prophesy from Isaiah, but I understand it. I also fear we are seeing something like it in our own day.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security released a report on Tuesday which identified violent white supremacy as “the most persistent and lethal threat in the homeland.” The acting secretary wrote, “I am particularly concerned about white supremacist violent extremists who have been exceptionally lethal in their abhorrent, targeted attacks in recent years.” What do you think those sour grapes are all about?

Meanwhile, Forbes Magazine reported last week how “the combined wealth of all U.S. billionaires increased by \$821 billion since March 18th—that's 28%”¹ During these same 6 months, 22 million of our fellow citizens lost jobs, and half of those are still unemployed. Millions have lost their homes, insurance, and basic daily necessities. Hunger and food insecurity has enveloped the poor in our nation. Even the middle class grasp for stability has become more tenuous. In other words, the profound fruitfulness in our nation is not being shared, and the poor and vulnerable are crying out for help.

The picture and the proportions are biblical. People are on edge, or worse. And we should not be surprised.

Today, thankfully, the prophet—Isaiah—is not focused on the heartbreaking disappointments of the nation, but rather on the goodness of the LORD. And this goodness involves a huge surprise, an utterly unexpected reversal of fortunes.

¹ Forbes, September 30, 2020.

We are now hearing from chapter 25, after the disasters Israel experienced as their nation became more divided, weakened and vulnerable. The powerful and violent people who have been the oppressors are getting their comeuppance. At the very same time, the LORD himself becomes a refuge for the poor and those in need.

Do you see how personal this is for God? The love of God becomes the shelter from the storm and the shade from the heat for those in distress. The promise of Isaiah is that the ruthless will be subdued and silenced in the end. But the best is yet to come. Isaiah has set the stage for this beautiful poem.

Isaiah paints an unforgettable picture of what distinguishes the character of our God from any other imagined god in the ancient (or modern) world.

The LORD of hosts...prepares a feast. Did you catch that? The glorious One enthroned in the heavens and surrounded by myriad angels, serving God night and day...this same God will come down to the holy mountain...put on an apron...and serve.

This is not just any banquet, our Lord's Table is set exquisitely—rich food filled with marrow and well-aged wines strained clear. It's nothing but the best for those who have suffered the worst. The other miracle is how this Jewish prophet envisions a feast that also includes foreigners—gentiles.

Our LORD destroys the shroud of death spread over all nations. You see, the Canaanites believed in a god of death who swallowed up a god of fertility.² Isaiah teaches of one God, the Lord of life, who swallows up death, forever; and who personally wipes the tears from all faces.

Imagine that—a Savior strong enough to cast down the mighty from their thrones; and yet humble enough to serve and console the lowly. Now that's a pleasant surprise!

Except we should not be surprised by this because we have pretty well memorized the 23rd Psalm. So, we are accustomed to thinking of our LORD as a caring shepherd who leads and guides us, and who also stands beside us in the shadow of death. Notice how our favorite song describes the LORD spreading out a feast for us to enjoy, with cups running over, while those who trouble us get to watch. Another pleasant surprise!

It's hard to tell whether the Psalmist was writing songs about Isaiah's prophesy or whether Isaiah was preaching comforting words from his favorite songs. Either way, our Old Testament message this Sunday is a tour de force in shaping our praying imagination to trust the goodness of the LORD.

Especially when we are afraid of the next unpleasant surprise, we need to hold fast to the goodness of the LORD. We need to stake our hope upon the gifts of God which endure, and then...thoroughly commit ourselves to sharing those gifts with other people who need them.

Listen, St. Paul had a host of unpleasant surprises when he visited Philippi. He healed a slave girl, and—because her owner was well-connected—Paul was beaten with rods in the city street and thrown into prison. It was not a happy place for him.

So, what a surprise that he would later write this letter to the Philippians, encouraging them to rejoice...always.

Interesting! Paul seems to be holding fast to something besides sour grapes over what happened. Paul appears to be holding onto—and sharing—the enduring gifts of God. Paul urges us to cling to God's gifts of joy, peace, gentleness, and whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, and commendable.

² Carolyn Sharp, p. 151.

These virtues enumerated by St. Paul are the same virtues revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. These character traits indicate how followers of Jesus are to think, speak, and act in accordance with the goodness of the LORD.

We should not be surprised to find this kind of character alive in some people and not in others. Jesus found the same thing during the last week of his life. As we've heard these past few Sundays, Jesus tells multiple stories about two kinds of people—the arrogant, powerful, so-called religious people who were looking out for themselves at the expense of others and refused to change; and another group of—let's face it—not-such-virtuous people who were willing to change...their thinking and their ways.

Like the prophet, Isaiah, Jesus is not neutral about these two kinds of people. He's got tough words for the arrogant and greedy people who had every opportunity to promote peace and justice for everyone. Jesus is likewise full of consoling hope for the poor and vulnerable people in the streets who have suffered enough.

And so, he tells another story, with a surprising twist in the plot. Imagine a grand royal banquet for which the invited guests are too arrogant and selfishly preoccupied to come. It is a very thinly veiled reference to the religious and political elite who killed and stoned the Jewish prophets.

Now imagine the unimaginable—a king who is willing to include everybody, the good and the bad—without discrimination. That is the kind of party that inspires you to change...into your very best clothes.

I know I am not alone in feeling consternation about why some poor fellow gets thrown out for not wearing a wedding robe. It can sound like an unpleasant surprise, a plot twist so uncharacteristic of Jesus' inclusivity.

I want you to relax. Today's lessons are about trusting the goodness of the LORD. Nothing from the prophets or from Jesus suggests a God who plays 'gotcha.' Everything from the prophets and from Jesus suggests a God who is longsuffering, abounding in mercy, and of great kindness.

So, the fellow who was rejected from the banquet was not a poor soul who couldn't change; he had to be one of the stubbornly arrogant, selfish people who refused to change.

Dear people of God, there is no future in sour grapes. There is hope, however, in God's goodness, gifted to us to be opened...and shared. For God's sake, be fruitful with your gifts of peace, freedom, grace and love. Be fruitful with truth and justice, hope and healing, and with your own precious life.

When we share the gifts of God with other people who need them, we learn how to serve like Jesus. And that means we are changed...changed and, therefore, ready for the banquet. What a pleasant surprise!

Amen.