

Sermon based on Isaiah 25: 6-9 ~ “This is Our God”
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All Saints Sunday, 2015
Northwood United Church, Surrey, BC

Not long ago, but in a place far away, I received a dinner invitation in the mail. It’s so exciting to get real mail in this day and age. It was a beautiful invitation, all tied up with ribbon, and the letters were carefully written by hand in the most beautiful of Calligraphy:

You are cordially invited...

“Cordially” - very seldom is that word used these days. And I’m pretty certain it’s not used for anything else but to invite someone to a dinner that’s going to be really amazing. “Cordially” - from the root “core” or “heart” - I invite you from the warmest place within my heart.

The dinner was to be a huge feast, being held in a prestigious venue with a mountaintop view. I’d been to dinner before at the top of Burnaby Mountain, and Grouse Mountain - venues with panoramic views. This mountain would be no less spectacular.

The invitation included a sumptuous menu:

Seared scallops with duck confit
Wild Mushroom and truffle soup with parmesan chips and warm sourdough crust
Grilled beef tenderloin with béarnaise sauce, lobster tail with clarified butter, served with crispy
roast potatoes and vegetables finished off with a cognac glaze and creme fraiche.
For dessert: chocolate crepes, hazelnut mousse filling, warm chocolate and orange ice cream.

And the wines. The wines!

Each course, paired perfectly with well-aged wines served at their absolute peak.

Who’s hungry? Yeah....

Maybe that menu doesn’t sound appetizing to you. Perhaps you’d prefer roast turkey with bread stuffing, mashed potatoes and gravy. Cranberry jelly still in the shape of the can, carrots, peas, sweet yams and pumpkin pie with ice cream.

Or perhaps it’s mac and cheese shared with the whole family, with love. Simple Chinese takeout. Butter chicken with curried vegetables and rice. Or beans, lentils and local fruit. Have I mentioned your favourite meal?

Great! Because you’re all invited. Let’s head up to the mountaintop together...

The thing about mountaintops is that it's always the place where God comes to the people. All the gods. Remember Zeus, and Mount Olympus? Mountains, yes, and Temples (like this one). These are the places where heaven and earth meet. "The thin places" as the Celts say. And these are the places where God prepares feasts for God's people.

The prophet Isaiah lays out the invitation today: "On this mountain, YHWH, the Almighty, will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine (oh my, I love that part!) - the best of meats and the finest of wines.

We arrive at the feast, you and I, at the top of the mountain. In that place - not long ago, but far away. As we climb to the top of this mountain we notice that it is not covered in snow and there are no bare rocks. A gentle incline only, with lush green grasses, clear flowing streams and beautiful flowers.

We arrive to find a beautiful table, all set with candles and cloth napkins. China plates, crystal glasses and the finest of silver and gold. It is easy to find our place cards, even though the table is set for billions and billions. As Isaiah wrote, "*all people.*" (I am struck by the number of times the prophet uses the word "all". *All peoples; all peoples; all nations; all faces; all the earth*). Yes, people are streaming up the mountainside now. They come from east and west, north and south. But before dinner, there is a show.

The dinner show was just as Isaiah had said: God destroying the shroud that enfolds us all; the sheet that covers all nations. What is this sheet, this SHROUD? The only time I know that word is used is for funerals, a sheet covering a coffin, a shroud. Perhaps it is death. Yes, it's death. But perhaps it is also sin. That thing we did. Or said. That thing that makes us feel guilty and the guilt seems to last forever. Those wars. That unequal distribution of food and money. The sharp words we used against another. Perhaps, also, it is grief and sadness. Yes. I can see it now. The pre-dinner show. God has lifted all that and taken it away. Wow. The peace I feel. It's indescribable.

I look along the table and see my dad. I've waited 50 years to see him. All the sadness I've felt, the grief, the loss - it's gone now. Yet I'm not dead, I'm still alive. This is not heaven, this place. But he's here with me again, and I feel such joy and gladness in my heart.

I look around at some of the other dinner guests. My mom is here. But she's not the same. The meanness and anger she always had is gone. I laugh with her about the good times, the funny times, the time she lost it laughing when she lit a match on her pants, and burned it down to her skin where she still had a scar some 40 years later.

Donald Trump is here. He's seated between a homeless man, and Barack Obama. Trump and the homeless man are shaking hands and smiling. Justin Trudeau and Steven Harper are clinking glasses of that unbelievable wine. Barack Obama is turned to the man on his right, and I can see now it is Osama bin Laden, and they are embracing like a mother and long-lost child.

At this table there are Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Seiks and Buddhists too. There are agnostics and atheists. In fact, in the distance I think I see Richard Dawkins chatting to the Pope.

Looking around at all this - these guests, this phenomenal food - I am happy and peace-filled, but my mind has been blown by it all. I can't believe it's really happening. I think I'd given up hope, waiting for it. I guess I'd forgotten my Hebrew. "QAVAH" - the word for wait. "QAVAH" - also the word for hope. I should have known. I should have *trusted*, that the God who made creation good in the first place has the power to restore it to goodness in the end.

Yes, my mind is blown.

After dinner, the host comes around to each one of us and asks us how we are, if we enjoyed the meal. Tears form in my eyes and spill down my cheeks. "I should have trusted you more, God," I say.

God looks at me lovingly and says "It's ok. You're only human. And you've had so much sadness and pain. Like everyone here...a lot of sadness and pain." And then She gently reaches out with His soft and tender hand, and wipes the tears from my eyes and I am *never sad again, not even for a moment*.

I turn to the people at the table - the Jews, the billionaires, the Muslims, the homeless, the criminals, the skeptics, the Evangelicals, the boy who shot up a school, the transgendered, the Hindus, the gays, the Buddhists, the poor, the preachers, and the ordinary folks with all these labels or without - all guests at the table - and I say "Can you believe it? This is *our* God!"