

Sermon on Isaiah 25:1-9
Indigenous Peoples Sunday, October 11, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace from God our Creator, the Great Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

As fitting on a day marking controversy around the Indigenous Peoples Day celebration versus old Columbus Day federal holidays, the scriptures today bring us opposite messages of God's abundance, healing and reconciliation versus the scarcity, rejection and violence far too common in this world. For on one hand we see the theme of **feasting** in Isaiah, in the Psalm, and Matthew's gospel - on the Lord's Mountain, on the table that the Lord prepares for us, and in the Parable of the Great Banquet. This positive theme runs through them all, and shows God's abundance over against all the scarcity and the fear that surrounds us in this life on earth. Abundant food and drink and the gathering of all peoples is an image we are drawn to - especially as God's promise of the feast to come for all the faithful.

On the other hand, we are troubled by the violent images that accompany these texts - the death and fear from other nations threatening the city in Isaiah, that now has been destroyed. The fear of evil, approaching enemies, and the "shadow of death" spoken about in the 23rd Psalm. The violent removal of the king's guest who wasn't wearing "proper clothing" to the wedding feast, which made him an unwelcome guest, the violence shown against the servants who went out bearing invitations, and the violent retribution which punished them for their evil deeds. It's not a parable with a happy ending or positive message!

But the context of Matthew's gospel may explain a few things. Matthew wrote his gospel after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, with Christians and Jews dispersed. They all struggled to survive in churches and synagogues without a Temple. People who came from the same roots of faith were now in competition for members to survive, often from the same families. I think the parable is more a picture of the "way things were" with impetuous kings like Herod, or Trump, and not an allegory about God and his kingdom.

So I find myself drawn to the healing balm of these Old Testament scriptures more than the gospel - in Isaiah and the 23rd Psalm! We read in Isaiah how God was praised for all the wonderful things God had done. That one day the Lord of hosts *"will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines....God will take away the shroud [of death], swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces...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!"* That's the good news!

And in the Psalm we hear the comforting image of the Lord as our Shepherd, who guides you and me to green pasture, safely through the dangers and the valleys of death. The Lord who prepares a table for you and me even in the presence of our enemies! We Christians identify this table with holy communion - the Lord's table to which we are all invited, when Jesus says "*This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, shed for you.*" So we come to the table today.

Our common Lutheran approach to this feast of our Lord's table is to say all are invited! All are welcome! Except that it gets complicated when we have to send out invitations. We are too comfortable among "our own", often too reticent and self-absorbed to go out into the streets to invite others to come! For Lutherans, and most Christians, it has just been easier to move out and find new tables!

So now we come to the present day, a time of transition and change, from Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day, and their totally opposite focus. Since 1937 Columbus Day was a National Holiday in the U.S.A., declared by President Franklin Roosevelt, to commemorate the landing of Christopher Columbus on the island of San Salvador (in the Bahamas) in 1492. Italian-Americans had pushed for this commemoration as a matter of ethnic pride and recognition, especially after a mob lynched 11 Italian immigrants in New Orleans in 1892, which started the commemoration. But this holiday ignored for years the genocide against Native peoples from the days of Columbus, who initiated the slavery and torture of the original inhabitants of the lands he arrived in and claimed for the King of Spain - the lands and resources stolen, by *conquistadors* and colonists from Europe.

As we celebrate today the peoples who are indigenous to this beautiful land, we recognize the many gifts they have given us in culture, language, foods, spirituality, and welcome. But we also recognize the consequences of our enmity against Native Americans, the genocide over the past 500-plus years and the hatred and discrimination that still lingers like a curse. We know how millions were killed and enslaved in the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico and South America (Aztecs, Mayans and Inca peoples) - and also in North America, including the Dakota and Ojibwe in Minnesota. In 1493 Pope Alexander VI in Rome issued a decree which divided the world from pole to pole, and gave European "Christian" nations the right to take over the lands of "non-Christian" indigenous peoples and remove or enslave their populations. It declared that anyone not Christian was "less than human", without legal rights. It became the basis for the U.S. Supreme Court's understanding of international law called the "Doctrine of Discovery." With this rationale, "Christians" could take over lands, break treaties, send Native children to boarding schools which stole native culture, their language and spirituality from them. The killing of the buffalo and exterminating Native peoples by starvation, war, and disease, were justified in the name of Christianity.

It is our Christian shame that the name of Jesus Christ was used in the oppression, suppression, theft of lands and genocide of Native peoples in the Americas, Africa, and Asia from the 15th through 20th centuries. Christian cultural and racial superiority was claimed, mostly at the point of a gun, as superior war technology made this possible. In recent decades, we have been living through times that have slowly awakened in us the realization that people of our religion, in the name of Jesus, have caused so much harm to so many peoples, and we have much to confess and repent. Not merely to bring guilt or shame, but to repent, to turn around, and to walk in new ways of relationship, peace, and justice for everyone, reconciled with those we once saw as enemies. So in 2016 the ELCA repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery. That fall I tore in pieces a facsimile of that Doctrine of Discovery in our worship service on the eve of Thanksgiving, to declare that we Lutherans reject the racism and violence of white European American Christians against so many peoples they (and we) didn't understand.

But despite such professions of faith, the oppression and injustice continues today. On the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, an oil pipeline still threatens to cross Native lands, and violent police actions against native people and protesters in 2016 remain seared in our memories. Native women and girls continue to go missing, assaulted or murdered today - women and girls who have disappeared, been raped or forced into prostitution, or found murdered in Minnesota, North and South Dakota. Poverty continues in Minnesota since Native lands were taken and sold off after the 1862 Dakota War, moving the Ojibway to reservations and expelling the Dakota to North and South Dakota. Over the years since many white Minnesotans have acquired, or inherited land and cabins in Minnesota's lake country, where the Ojibway people once lived. We see in 2020 suffering in the Native population from Covid-19 much higher than in the majority population due to health care inequities. Voting rights on reservations are at risk.

Sorry for such a grim picture! So in the wake of our resolutions and professions of faith, we have a lot of work to do! Making peace and doing justice takes work! But we have this promise in scripture that one day God will gather all the peoples on this earth for a great feast of welcome, take away all fear and death, and wipe away all tears, so that we can all sing one song of joy! One sign of this is how the Lord prepares for us a table of goodness and mercy, to which all are invited, where we will dwell with God forever. No more walls, no more prisons, no more suffering from exclusion and hate. We can begin to create those tables and communities where all are welcomed and loved, as a foretaste of this great feast to come! In the meantime, I close with this quote from Paul's letter to the Philippians, an appointed lesson for today which we did not read, urging all of us who are faithful to hold to the true values of our faith, as we follow Jesus, especially these days of our national election, and in how we treat and live with our

brothers and sisters, of every creed, color, tribe and nation. It is a better way to go, it is Jesus' way, much more positive than the other paths we have been following!

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. For the Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God....Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.” (Phil. 4:6-9)