

# FOR THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN THROUGH IT<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah 25: 1-9

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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Whatever the outcome of the election in two weeks, I'm sure we will all share some relief that the campaigning will be over. This year the campaign even reached the pulpits of 31 churches whose pastors took part in what they called "Pulpit Freedom Sunday." Urged on by an Arizona law firm that wants to challenge the IRS rules against partisan politicking by tax exempt organizations, these 31 pastors flagrantly violated the law by urging their congregations to vote for a particular candidate that they claim would be the "Christian" choice for President.

It makes me wonder what world they are living in! Certainly not my world! Can you imagine my trying to tell you how to vote? And it makes me wonder about their congregations! Are they such wimps that they can't decide for themselves? Do they have to have their pastor tell them?

Here's what I'm going to do on November 4. I will go to vote, and when I get the ballot, I will enter the booth and thank God that the privacy of my vote is sacred, that there is no pressure on me to tell anyone how I vote, and that I am pastor of a church that is full of competent people who

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make up their own minds to vote however they wish and still live together in harmony. I hope every one of you votes, and I hope that the challenge presented by the law firm in Arizona is soundly defeated. We don't need God proclaimed as a mascot to one political party.

I

After November 4, we can all say that we have been through it. But that phrase is commonly used in a much wider sense, as when a friend comes up to you and says, "You look like you've been through it." It, in that case, could be any number of things, from the sublime to the tragic. But whenever we have been through it, whatever it is, we are in some sense veterans. We are no longer rookies in life, for we have been through it.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, in all its profundity, is never more profound than when it says, *Even though I walk **through** the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me....* Here was a poet who went through it and was sure that he was not alone.

But today I want to pose another scenario. What about those who are going through it, and don't feel the presence and strength and support of the divine. What about those who feel all alone out there in the darkness while they are going through it, whatever it is?

That is what seems to be hiding behind the passage we read from Isaiah 25. Like Psalm 23, it is a poem. Probably it was sung, so we can say that what we have in Isaiah 25 is a victory song composed after an ancient battle to overthrow an enemy city. It begins with lyrics that take flight from the first words:

*O Lord, you are my God;  
I will exalt you, I will praise your name;  
for you have done wonderful things.*

Now the fact that it is in the past tense is significant. *You have done wonderful things....* It begs the question of whether or not the poet thought God was doing wonderful things in the midst of the siege and the battle. He gives some hint that the overthrow of the city was at tremendous loss of life and great suffering. Later in the poem we get this illuminating lyric:

*...the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away....*

We are talking about tears, disgrace, hardship. It was not easy going through ~~the~~ and one wonders if the poet and the people thought God was with them when the tears and the disgrace seemed to be all that they could see.

But now, the poet is writing AFTER the battle, AFTER the tears, AFTER the disgrace. He could sit down and write such rapturous religious poetry, giving God the credit for staying with them all the way through the

battle, only in retrospect. Perhaps I should have called this sermon "God in Retrospect!" Sometimes we recognize the presence of God with us only in retrospect. When we look back over the difficult, challenging times in our lives, times when we were going through it (whatever it was), only then can we see the hand of God guiding us along the way.

## II

But there is more in this text than a recognition that we sometimes see God only in retrospect. What is new for Isaiah is an about face in which he sees a dramatic vision of the future, a vision of the goal to which God will lead all of humanity. In that vision, this poem seems to take flight and transcend the limits of Isaiah's time and place, and reach a higher level of truth that is as pertinent today as it was in his day. It soars, and we have to buckle our spiritual seatbelts and hang on, for it takes us to a new level of thinking about humanity. Isaiah pictures all of humanity sharing the blessing of God. He writes about a vision of God's ideal for humanity. It is not a Republican or Democratic vision; it is not even an American vision. It is God's vision, and here it is:

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines....  
And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations...*

And what is that *shroud cast over all peoples*? We know! It is appointed to us all once to die. Whatever our contemporary vitality, whatever our current health, whatever our present situation, we still have that shadow cast over us. Every birthday celebration is a reminder not only of the past, but of our inevitable future and our impending appointment with death.

No accumulation of wealth can excuse us from that destiny. No academic degree can educate us out of that inevitable future. No military might can intimidate that waiting rendezvous. We all have one appointment that we must keep. And Isaiah speaks of it as a *shroud that is cast over all peoples*.

But then, Isaiah envisions a new future in these words that years later would be quoted by the Apostle Paul: *God will swallow up death forever!* All the other victories we celebrate, including the victory celebrations for the winners on November 4, will be penultimate. That is the reason we must never forget to proclaim the ultimate victory of God, who in Christ entered the doorway of that dark shroud and left Death dead on the threshold.

And for those who are willing to entrust their destiny to this God, there is a lifting of the pall that covers the whole earth. Sure, the physical fact of death remains. It is an appointment we still must keep. But God takes

away the terror of it. Death is no longer a shadow, but an exodus. It is a transition to a house not made with hands.

### III

The great message of the Christian faith is that Christ has been through death. The presence of the empty cross quietly proclaims, He has been there; He has done that; and it's OK. He has been through the ultimate death, the death that the world dreads! To believe in this great truth is not to be deluded, as some would claim. It is, rather, to believe that death is not the end. It is a profound faith found in today's text from Isaiah, but also reflected in the New Testament witness that says, *Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*<sup>2</sup>

Good friends, it is the nature of God to wipe away every tear from our eyes. There is a deep hope in those words that, when all is said and done, God will bring healing to a broken world, to a divided nation, to our fractured lives. There is a deep longing in the world, a longing that encompasses every religion, to see all the tears and pain and suffering of the world wrapped up in the arms of God until the last tear has been wiped away and there is wholeness that becomes the central reality of our lives. This is the hope that shapes our lives as a community of faith!

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<sup>2</sup> I Corinthians 15: 16.

And with that hope, we are to live in the present with a mission in the world, a mission to share in the purpose of God; that is, to make a safe place for all people, to care for the hurting, relieve the suffering, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and encourage the despondent. The church around the world is on the ground level with the poor and dispossessed, offering hope and help in their distress. We are called in hope to bring justice to an unjust world. God's purpose and ours is to *destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples....*