“He Will Swallow Up Death,” Isaiah 25:1-12 (Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 29, 2024)

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you; I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. **2**For you have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin; the foreigners’ palace is a city no more; it will never be rebuilt.

**3**Therefore strong peoples will glorify you; cities of ruthless nations will fear you. **4**For you have been a stronghold to the poor, a stronghold to the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat; for the breath of the ruthless is like a storm against a wall, **5**like heat in a dry place. You subdue the noise of the foreigners; as heat by the shade of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is put down.

**6**On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. **7**And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. **8**He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

**9**It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” **10**For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab shall be trampled down in his place, as straw is trampled down in a dunghill. **11**And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim, but the Lord will lay low his pompous pride together with the skill of his hands. **12**And the high fortifications of his walls he will bring down, lay low, and cast to the ground, to the dust.

***“This is the Word of the Lord.” “Thanks be to God!”***

One of the most important concepts in Christianity is “salvation.” Christians talk about it all the time: how we need to get saved, how we have been saved.

We typically understand our salvation as something that happened in the past. We say things like, “I got saved at a summer camp when I was in the eighth grade,” or “I prayed to receive Christ at that Christmas conference during my freshman year of college.”

For Christians, there certainly is a component of our salvation that took place in the past. If you are a Christian, that means there had to be a time in your past when you recognized you were a sinner, you had broken God’s law, that God was justly angry at your sin, but you repented of your sins, trusted Jesus Christ to give you salvation, and were reconciled to God.

But did you know many, if not most, of the references to salvation in the Bible ***have a future orientation to them?*** In other words, when we read in the Bible about our salvation, ***we read of something that has yet to happen to us.*** One of my favorite examples of this is found in Romans 13:11b: “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.” Paul turns the typical modern-day Christian understanding of salvation on its head. We tend to equate our salvation almost entirely with the moment we first believed the gospel. But in Romans 13 Paul says, “No, our salvation is ahead of us. It’s something we don’t have yet, it’s in the future, and it’s closer to us now than when we first heard and believed the good news of Jesus Christ.”

This future aspect of salvation is certainly on display in our text for today, Isaiah 25. We read in verse 9, “It will be said on that day, ‘Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.’” This salvation is something that hasn’t happened yet, but it is coming, it’s on its way, it’s nearer now to us than it’s ever been, and if we focus on it, we’ll find strength for the here and now.

Three points about our salvation: *first, it means we will be saved from death.* *Second, it means we will be saved with life.* *Third, we will be saved through justice.*

First, salvation means we are saved from death.To our wider, American culture, the whole idea of salvation is a joke. The dominant thought in western culture today seems to me to be something like this: “You don’t need to be saved. There is nothing you need to be saved from. What you need is to make a great life for yourself. You deserve it, so go get it.”

A couple of years ago I saw an ad, as a part of a nation campaign for this certain product, with a tagline that said: “Worship yourself, and the world will follow.” I thought, “That perfectly sums up what our culture believes today.” At least the great religious traditions of the world, however wrong I as a Christian think they are in so many ways, acknowledge human beings need saving in some way. But today, in the United States, we don’t need saving; we deserve to be worshiped.

But Christianity says, “Of course, we need saving, and the ultimate proof of it ***is death***.” Death leaves no doubt you need saving, and you cannot save yourself.

Our society, for the most part, does not want to talk about death. When we do manage to talk about it, we try to make it sound like death is a natural part of life. It’s the way things should be.

For example, you have the Disney explanation of death in the movie *The Lion King*. Mufasa, the lion king of the jungle, and his cub, Simba, are out on their morning walk, and Mufasa says to Simba (in the voice of the late great James Earl Jones, a native Mississippian), “Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. As king, you need to understand that balance and respect all the creatures, from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope.” Simba says, “But, Dad, don’t we eat the antelope?” “Yes, Simba, but let me explain. When we die, our bodies become the grass, and the antelope eat the grass. And, so, we are all connected in the great circle of life.” And Elton John starts singing, “The Circle of Life.” I guess we’re supposed to say, “Oh, okay, death is nothing to be scared of. It’s natural. I’m really looking forward to being fertilizer.”   
  
But sometimes even our culture can’t help it and tries to look at death head on. In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, the late Robin Williams plays an English teacher trying to get his students at all-male boarding school to think about how precious their lives are. He takes them out of the classroom to the main lobby and the school’s trophy case, where they’ve hung pictures of teams from decades past who’ve won championships. Robin Williams tells them to step forward and look closely at those pictures, and he says, “You’ve walked past them many times. I don’t think you’ve really looked at them. They’re not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel … They believe they’re destined for great things … Their eyes are full of hope … But you see, gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils … We are food for worms, lads. Because, believe it or not, each and every one of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die.”

It can seem almost foolish talking about death in our church like ours. We’re so young. We’ve had just a handful of funerals at Grace over the years. I went back and looked at it’s been almost three years since I’ve done a funeral. Therefore, around here, at least, it can seem like death is not a pressing matter. Even when someone does die, if they do so at a ripe, old age, with loved ones around them, at their funeral it can almost seem as if death is natural.

But then you go to some other funerals, where the coffin isn’t eight feet long, like they typically are for an adult, but four feet long. It’s not an adult lying there. I’ve had to do a few funerals like that over the years and let me tell you that when you go to a funeral like that no one sings “The Circle of Life.”

I’m not trying to depress you. I just want you to wake up and see that ***the power to save yourself is not in you, and the proof is in death.***  The world is a place of cemeteries. Death robs us of everything: it takes away our family, our friends, our pleasures, our hopes, ***everything.***

Nor is there any dignity in death. I’ve gotten to be in the house or in the hospital room when they wheel away someone who just died. When they lift that lifeless corpse off the bed and onto the gurney, it reminds me of nothing so much as the corpse of an animal, like some of the deer I’ve killed in my life. Death comes for all of us, it robs us of everything, it’s not dignified or glorious, and ***there’s nothing we can do about it.***

But then we read verses 7-8 of Isaiah 25: “**7**And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. **8**He will swallow up death forever … ” Isaiah 25:7-8a.

One day our God will destroy death, and he will do that by raising his people from the dead and giving us new bodies. Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 15, where he quotes Isaiah 25. If we die before Jesus returns, then at his return he’ll give us new, glorious, resurrected bodies: bodies that can’t get sick, can’t wear out, can’t grow tried, and cannot die. And if we are still alive when Jesus returns, he’ll transform the bodies that we have right now (that are getting sick, that are wearing out, that are growing tired, and can certainly die) into those glorious, resurrected bodies. That’s what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 15:51b: “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.”

We will be saved from death. But as wonderful as that is, that’s not all. That’s not even the best part of salvation.

Second, we will be saved with life. That’s Isaiah 25:6: “On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.”

Many of us to have good friends and family who love us, and a couple of times a year we get together with these dear people and eat with them. Maybe it’s Thanksgiving, maybe it’s Christmas. When this feast happens, no expense is spared for the food. Someone (or more likely several people) have been cooking for days to make sure everyone will have plenty to eat. Your favorite desserts are prepared. Everyone has their favorite drink.

Finally, the time comes to sit at the table, and you begin to eat, and it’s all so good because some foods you only eat at this time of year so you’ve been looking forward to it for months.

Yet, that’s not the best part of the feast! The best part is afterwards. The kids get up and go outside to play, but what do these grownups do who have known and loved one another for decades? They sit in their chairs around the table and talk. It so confuses the kids, but for hours the grownups sip on coffee or sip on swine and nibble on dessert and just talk. They tell the same stories, but even though you’ve heard them before it seems you laugh harder at them every year. They never get old. That time around the table is so much fun, you don’t want it to end.

But, on earth, all good things must come to an end. Sooner or later, you must clear the table. Sooner or later, you have to drive back home.

But at the feast Isaiah prophesies about ***the party never ends***. The end of history for all who trust in Jesus is a banquet, a feast. Jesus sits at the head of the table, and we will sit around it, laughing, eating, drinking, rejoicing in what Jesus has done for us, and the best part is ***it will never grow old.*** We’ll never get tired of it. We’ll never want it to end so we can go and do something else. ***An endlessly satisfying feast.*** That’s what being saved with life looks like.

It never fails that when a popular TV series addresses the subject of heaven, they always depict it as being boring. I’m thinking of shows like *The Good Place* with Ted Danson and Kristen Bell, or *Forever* with Fred Armisen and Maya Rudolph. The idea is that no matter how enjoyable heaven might be, in the long run even the best environments grow tiresome, so the notion of an existence where everyone is always perfectly satisfied is absurd.

It used to really frustrate me, but then I thought about it and realized, “Of course, that’s how those writers have to script these shows.” Because the producers are writing about heaven, about eternal life, in ignorance.

They don’t know *the two things that really make heaven, heaven.* The first is that *we will finally be sinless.* We will have capacities for joy at the banquet feast of heaven we cannot currently comprehend. You might say that our capacity for joy right now is about the size of a coffee cup, so we quickly grow tired of just about everything (not to say how jealous we can get now, how angry, how lazy, how selfish).

But if our capacity for joy is now the size of a coffee cup, then in our new bodies our capacity for joy is roughly comparable to the size of the solar system. In other words, *we’ll never fill it up.* At the banquet feast of heaven, sitting with Jesus at the head of the table, he keeps pouring out the wine of joy and we keep drinking it up.

And of course, the writers and producers of these shows don’t know about Jesus. They don’t know how he is, as the Lord God Omnipotent, the source of all the joy in the universe. They can’t even imagine that it’s possible to know someone who produces happiness like he does; all you have to do is be in his presence.

I don’t know it either from experience, but I know it by faith. And so I can sing hymns like this one about the joy Jesus will provide: “O Christ, he is the fountain, the deep, deep well of love; the streams on earth I’ve tasted, more deep I’ll drink above; There to an ocean fullness his mercy doth expand, and glory, glory dwelleth in Immanuel’s land.”

Don’t you want to be at a table like that? You have the invitation. All you have to do is accept it. All you have to do is go to Jesus and say, “I’m hungry. Will you feed me? I don’t understand even one percent of this banquet in heaven, but I know this: if it’s real, if that’s what’s going to happen, I don’t want to miss it. Jesus, will you make sure that I’ll be there?” And he will.

*Third, we will be saved through justice.* We see in this passage not only what the banquet on the mountain of the Lord will be like, but that not everyone will be there. We read about a city that’s been destroyed in verse 2. We read about ruthless nations in verse 3.

Then in verses 10-11 we read, “**10**For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, and Moab shall be trampled down in his place, as straw is trampled down in a dunghill. **11**And he will spread out his hands in the midst of it as a swimmer spreads his hands out to swim, but the Lord will lay low his pompous pride together with the skill of his hands.”

God, these verses say, will crush Moab (a nation to the east of Israel, that often attacked God’s people) down into a pile of manure (that’s what a dunghill is), and they will try to climb out of it by making a swimming motion, but they’ll only continue to sink into the muck and mire.

If you’re tempted to think, “That’s kind of harsh of God, to punish poor Moab like that,” ***don’t.*** Because Moab represents all the people throughout history who have oppressed the poor, the weak, the widows, the orphans, the immigrant, the stranger. This isn’t an arbitrary display of God’s anger; ***this is justice.***

And everyone, whether you are a Christian or not, wants a universe where evil gets punished.

Imagine someone you loved is killed by a drunk driver, and it turns out this is the driver’s fifth DUI. He’s arrested, convicted, and you go to the courthouse to see the sentencing. You rightly expect the judge to throw the book at him.

But instead, the judge says to drunk driver, “You know what, I am not one of those angry judges. I am a loving, forgiving judge. We’re going to forget this ever happened. You’re not going to jail, I’m just going to give you probation, and if you promise you’ll be good and that you’ll never do it again I’ll let you go free today.” What would you say? “What a great judge. I’m so glad our legal system believes in forgiveness”? No! You’d demand he be removed from the bench, you’d petition the bar to revoke his license to practice law. That’s an awful judge.

***God will not make that mistake***. He is rightly angry at the Moabs of the world, he will punish them, and part of the joy of having a seat at the banquet in heaven will be seeing God vindicate you. For those of you who tried to forgive our enemies and refused to take revenge on those who’ve wronged you, part of the joy of heaven will be seeing God dispense perfect, righteous justice to those who stubbornly continued to commit evil on earth.

Finally, let’s look at the last half of verse eight: “[A]nd the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.” Isaiah 25:8b.

What does that mean? I think it means this. I have lost count of the number of people who have gone through something horrible, like cancer, or divorce, or they suffer the death of a child, but they still said to me, “You know, it was the hardest time of my life. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. But I thank God for it because I would not know him or trust him the way I do know if it hadn’t happened.” The promise is that at the banquet on the mountain of the Lord, we will be satisfied as we look back over all that happened to us, even the hard things, even the painful things. You say, “I can’t understand how that’s possible.” Me either, but that’s the promise.

There’s that place in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s timeless novel *The Brothers Karamazov* where he puts in one of his character’s mouths the following: “I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage … that in the world’s finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they’ve shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened with men.” That’s how we are saved through justice.

In the meantime, until that happens, remember some of the first words of the next chapter of Isaiah, Isaiah 26:3-4: “You keep him in ***perfect peace*** whose mind is stayed on you [NIV 1984 has “him whose mind is steadfast”], because he trusts in you. **4**Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.”

“Perfect peace” translates two Hebrew words: *shalom shalom.* In Hebrew, when they wanted to express superlativeness, they didn’t have –er or –est suffixes (as in “faster” and “fastest”). Instead, the Hebrews doubled or tripled the word to get that across. And “shalom” in this context means complete emotional and psychological wholeness, where you aren’t rattled at all.

That’s the promise we have now: not a perfect life (we have to wait on the banquet for that), but perfect peace. How do you get it? ***By keeping your mind focused steadfastly on the Lord.*** Not letting anything or anyone take your eyes off him.

If you keep your eyes on Jesus, Isaiah says, then no matter what happens, no matter how difficult things get, no matter how far away the great banquet may seem, you will have peace.

But what if you can’t do it? What if you’re nowhere near mature enough in the face to focus on Jesus like that (and friends, in times of hard suffering, no one is that mature)?

That’s why we all need the church. You need other believers to help keep your eyes on Jesus.

In Exodus 17, we read how the Israelites, while on their march to the Promised Land, were locked in battle with the evil Amalekite nation. We read that so long as Moses, the leader of the Israelites, held his hands up in the air, along with his staff, the Israelites were winning the battle. But whenever he let his hands drop, the Israelites would start to lose the battle.

So, Aaron and Hur, Moses’ brother and Moses’ friend, stood alongside Moses and helped hold his arms up, until Israel totally defeated the Amalekites.

At some point in our lives, we all need an Aaron and Hur. We need people to help us keep our eyes on Jesus, to keep ourselves in “perfect peace.” Who are your Aaron and Hur? Do you have someone you can call on when you start to grow weary? Are you someone others can call when they need help?

Friends, we are on our way to a party, the party to end all parties, one that will never end. If that’s true, shouldn’t we be joyful? If that’s true, shouldn’t we tell other people about this party so they can be there, too? Most of all, shouldn’t we have we have peace? Do you know that peace? Do you know you’re on the way to that party? If you’re not sure, don’t let the sun set today without finding out how you can be. PRAY