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Isaiah 25: 6-8; Ephesians 2: 1-2, 12-13; 19-22

Title: "Thanking God for Jesus"

During my life, I have witnessed many evangelists on street corners, waving their Bibles at passing cars at busy intersections in many cities, and in Las Cruces recently, at Three Crosses on Main Street and Hwy 70, and I have always wondered: Even if people were intrigued and wanted to stop and listen, how could they, in that traffic? They went on their way down the road.

But neither were the crowds stopping to listen and engage with them in the public parks of San Francisco. The evangelists, with megaphones, were shouting to be heard, threatening dire consequences with their messages of doomsday and destruction, and anxious about saving every person who passed. It was a futile exercise, that completely failed to show the gentle spirit and committed love shown to others that Jesus has emphasized! Perhaps the evangelists saw themselves as the prophets of old, such as Elijah, competing with the prophets of Baal! None of us can say for sure, but I do remember the total put-off that I felt. I wanted no part in that kind of religion. For, in the shouting, there was only warning and negativity, with no opportunity to be drawn in and get close to God. There was no intimacy or compelling invitation to come, and follow, Jesus.

The hunger and thirst I felt, and still feel, for God, is satisfied most often when I can delve into Bible passages that show me how to live, and love, and find truth and joy in the freedom that Christ has given to me through his promises, that encourage obedience to his word. This is the ultimate reward for me!

Through the prophet Isaiah today, we are promised so many wonderful, life-changing rewards! Hear his words again:

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear."

**What gracious hospitality we are promised in this new life! Isaiah continues:**

"And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; He will swallow up death forever."

**And what powerful deliverance from death to eternal life! This promise is realized and told in our Ephesians passage, that declares, when we were without Christ, we were strangers to the covenant promise, "having no hope and without God in the world." But the life and sacrifice of Christ Jesus has brought us to a new beginning in the household of God! He has joined us together into a household that has become our spiritual home, a holy temple, in which we can serve God with thanksgiving and praise.**

**Isaiah then proclaims:**

"Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken."

And what joy we receive by the grace of our almighty, eternal God, in knowing that God is for us, that our disgrace has turned to hope for a future! All it takes is a Word, a breath of the Spirit, from the mouth of the Lord.

Just as the mere breath of God created the world by moving over the dark, chaotic waters and by establishing order among all his creatures, so God is still creating a new world among us today, for in Christ, we have been given hope as Jesus draws near to his people to assure us that we are his beloved, and that the power of his love will cause the obedient ones to live in freedom from the dark shroud of misery and to pursue those Christ-like attributes that enhance our relationships with others. Having been given the greatest gift of grace and mercy through the sacrifice of Jesus, it is evident that we should extend the same grace and mercy to all God's creatures, for we, by God's decree, were made to have dominion over all things in and on the earth.

From the beginning, hospitality and sharing a meal have been the greatest signs of God's love and grace toward us. It is a powerful way to demonstrate the gospel to others, and particularly to strangers and the marginalized. It is easier to entertain friends we already know and love rather than show this same hospitality to strangers. Yet, hospitality is a way to build community and often to transform lives that will later come to glorify God.

We can take a quick look into the history of God's people and find examples of lives changed, transformed, and made better by offering hospitality:

Abraham offered exceptional hospitality when he welcomed 3 strangers into his tent. He provided them with food, water, and a place to rest. This act of hospitality turned out to be a divine encounter, as two of the visitors were angels who delivered important messages and blessings to Abraham and his wife Sarah.

Joshua was given food and protection by the prostitute Rahab, and in turn she and her family were spared when the Israelites conquered Jericho.

Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector, by inviting himself to his home. This act of kindness and acceptance led to Zacchaeus's transformation and new commitment to reimburse all his clients.

In the story of The Good Samaritan, Jesus taught the importance of showing compassion and hospitality to those in need and of different backgrounds, and to love one's neighbor.

We can live as reflections of God's character in these ways:

We can welcome others into our homes, and make our homes and lives a reflection of his generous spirit. By the way, to extend hospitality does not mean one must cook a 7-course meal! Often it is a simple, cool drink of water, a light snack, and a friendly welcome; but in the process, one's home has been opened in anticipation of meeting new friends on a more personal level and coming to a more intimate understanding of who we are to each other, and who we can be as we serve the church

together, and as we practice our faith alongside each other. Hospitality is a birthmark of the church: we show our love and faith to one another and it flows out our doors to the outside world.

We can welcome and serve the needy and the outcasts, following Jesus' example to provide for and support others, especially those who cannot do anything in return. When we connect with strangers, we build meaningful relationships, often using mealtimes to share the gospel and talk about what matters most to us. And there is a bonus: We as the givers grow spiritually and transform our own hearts and lives. Hospitality is the best kind of evangelism!

On this day of World Communion, we have been given the most beautiful opportunity to celebrate The Lord's Supper with friends from far and near. This supper is so very meaningful in our history, for at the Last Supper of Jesus he urged his followers: "Do this in remembrance of me."

Jesus commanded this meal to be a sign and promise that "with his crucified body and shed blood," Christ "feeds and nourishes our souls to everlasting life." It was an intimate meal, with close friends who had traveled the Holy Land with Jesus and who loved him beyond measure. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper changes a simple meal into a glorious promise, a covenant of life and light for all our days.

Our granddaughter, Abby, once visited us when she was not quite 4 years old. She loved to come to church, and one day had declared to Beth as she walked out into the courtyard, "This is MY church!"

So on this particular day, it was a Communion Sunday. As Pastor Norm began the Words of Institution and broke the loaf of bread, Abby was watching with great interest. As Norm began distributing the trays of bread to the elders, she whispered to me, "Grandma what are they doing?" I answered, "We are thanking God for Jesus." When the tray was passed to me I turned to Abby and said, "This is the bread of life. Do you want to take it?" She said, "Yes I'm starving!" A while later as the tray of juice was passed I said, "Abby, this is the cup of salvation." She took the small cup and held it for a few moments; she took a tiny sip; And then another, savoring the taste of it she sipped and sipped, wanting the small amount of juice to last! When she had finished, she gazed at the empty cup and softly said, "Thank you, God, for Jesus."

Abby had physical hunger when she asked about the bread, but she did not see it yet as a miracle meal, a sign from God; and yet, by the time she savored the juice, she had realized that there was something more to this ritual than just a bite of bread and a tiny swallow of juice. She had sensed that somehow there is another type of hunger and a food that sustains it.

It is this 'starving for the spirit of God' that brings us to full faith and commitment -- and it is this yearning hunger that Jesus promises to alleviate. The trust and faith of small children is unassuming and uncomplicated. Abby, a starving child of God, sees the loaf being broken with hope rising in her heart that she will be fed, and fully satisfied. She trusts because she has learned to trust her parents who love and provide for her. Abby accepts the mystery of the Lord's Supper, with eyes and heart wide open. We too are God's children, starving for the bread of heaven, but adults are more assuming and complicated. We starve our faith with the worries and struggles of earthly life, with eyes

shut tight to the spiritual food that really matters, and eyes open wide to food that merely feeds our desires, egos, and bellies.

God bids us to do the work of faith, so that we can truly see Christ, be of one mind with him and live together in harmony, not only for our own benefit but for the glory of God. The Lord's Supper brings hope of unity and reminds us that through God's covenant in Jesus Christ we are a people of promise.

Christ, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, invites us to this table of hospitality in astounding love, spiritual unity, abiding faith, and peace. God reconciles us in this humble act that brings us to the feet of Jesus in gratitude and praise. We do not want to miss the meaning or importance of this gift! God provides a life-giving, joyful feast that binds us as brothers and sisters to the very heart of Christ.

Come! Christ, the Lord is our host at this table, and he offers the gift of himself to all who truly believe and trust in him. Come! Taste and see that the Lord is good!

Amen.

~15 min.