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“The Perigree of God”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time/World Communion Sunday (Year B)

October 4, 2015

Isaiah 25:6–10a; Psalm 24; Mark 8:1–10

If you happened to have glimpsed the supermoon last Sunday night, and the full lunar eclipse that accompanied it around 10:00 p.m.,
you’re one of the lucky ones who had a break in the clouds;
we didn’t!

I kept wondering last Sunday if two of our very pregnant moms-to-be in the choir, Kim and Catherine, would feel the first tugs of labor as we sang “Come, Labor On,” while the gravitational pull of the supermoon was working on them.

As the astronomers explain it, a supermoon occurs whenever the elliptical orbit of the moon puts it at its perigee, or closest point to the earth. That is what happened last Sunday night: the moon made its closest pass at us. And that will not happen again until 2033.

The moon wasn’t really any bigger. It just appeared so because it was at its closest point to the earth. It loomed large. And because of that, its gravitational pull on the tides was at its strongest and its potential pull on would-be moms at its greatest.

In this poem from the prophetic imagination of Isaiah,
God is looming as large as the supermoon. God is near!

On this mountain, on Mt. Zion, on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem,
God, one day in the future will prepare a banquet, not only for leaders,
not only for God's chosen people, but for all people, all nations.
All, all, all, all, all—Isaiah says it five times to make sure
everyone gets the message.

The gates of exclusion, the doors of xenophobia will be unbolted.

The rusty gates of the walled city will be lifted up,
the ancient dented doors will be flung wide open,
that the King of Glory may come in as Lord of the Great Banquet.

The gates and doors which formerly served as barriers to prevent access
will be transformed into portals of welcome to this place of great feasting.

And streams of people from all nations will gather:

- people who have despaired because of political oppression;
- people who have suffered from crushing poverty or debt;
- people who have endured injustice and racial prejudice for too long;
- people who have grieved over suicides and deaths;
- people who have lived with a long bitterness in their marriage;
- people who have endured separation from their loved ones, or from the land that they once called home;
- people who have lived with any fear, anxiety, guilt, or hopelessness.

Great multitudes that no one can count from every tribe, people and language
will be invited in to share the feast.

Who is the King of Glory? Who is the Lord of the Banquet?

It is the Lord Almighty, who plans and serves the menu to feed all people:
richest foods, fat meats full of marrow, and the finest of choice wines.

Nothing but the best will do for the Lord's guests at this banquet of abundance.

And what about that host? What will the Lord Almighty consume?

The Lord Almighty, the one who created all things edible,
the one who could eat anything desired,

will swallow as an appetizer the shrouds of our mourning,
followed by an entree of death itself.

The table host will pause only to use his napkin to wipe the tears off of every face
around the table as he consumes the very things that consume us,
that worry us sick, that hijack our future stories, that hurt our hearts.
Destruction, despair, depression, death, the great swallows will be swallowed up!
Things that are not right will be made right, once and for all, at this banquet,
on this mountain, around this table, as God draws near.

A woman at Croasdaile Village in my Sunday afternoon study group there
shared a story with us last week about a moment that changed her life
when God drew near, perhaps.

She grew up in Greensboro, she said, once a highly segregated southern city
with walls that divided black and white into east and west Greensboro.
In those post-WWII/pre-civil rights days, she said her mother applied for and won
a contract to supply and manage the concession stand
at an all black movie theater in east Greensboro.

The concession stand occupied an outside wall of the theatre,
and movie goers could either buy the best of candies and finest of soft drinks
from outside the theatre, or from the inside.

One day, when she was about six, her mother took her to the theatre with her,
and left the little girl in the car just outside where she could keep an eye on her
while she sold concessions for a few minutes prior to a movie.

And the little girl, with her face pressed against the car window,
noticed that some of the children who came to see the movie
were nicely dressed and groomed, while others
were disheveled, dirty, and shoeless.

When her mother came back to the car, the little girl shared her observation
with her mother about the alarming state of some of the families,
to which her mother paused, sighed, and said to her,

“Honey, life is not fair.”

And for the little girl, that unrightness, that revelation stuck with her all of her life.

Her name is Ann Williams, and she and her husband, Herb, are the ones who

became the first managers of Urban Ministries of Durham in 1983.

That parking lot epiphany at age six became a core narrative for her,

a point of grace or disgrace, as the case may be,

that guided what she and her husband would later do in response to the

unfairness she observed that day:

the unequal distribution of wealth and resources among God’s children.

The prophetic voice of Isaiah says, “The Sovereign Lord will remove

the disgrace of his people from all the earth.”

Things that are not right, not fair, will be made right, once and for all,

at this banquet, on this mountain, around this table, says the Lord.

I may have told you this story before, but it’s worth repeating here

because it is a core narrative for me, a time when God drew near, perhaps.

When our own children were small,

we were sitting around the dinner table one evening,

trying to encourage everyone to eat their green beans and vegetables,

to not talk with their mouths full, please,

to use their napkins, and to finish their meal in a timely fashion.

Stuart, our youngest, who was prone to talk more than the rest of us,

was actually not talking, but was taking an inordinate amount of time

to tear off tiny little pieces of bread and eat them one at a time.

And thinking that he was dawdling on purpose, I said,

“Stuart, what in heaven’s name are you doing?”

And he said very calmly, “Mom, I’m eating like Jesus eats.”

He had observed us taking communion enough times in church

to note that the bread is usually doled out in tiny bits to the faithful.

And as we commend everyone to “do this in remembrance of me,”

he was remembering Jesus in this way.

In reflecting again on this story, it strikes me now that many of God's children do have to eat in this way, picking through garbage dumps for tidbits of food, jumping to grab sandwiches tossed to them by the police, rifling through dumpsters for tossed out leftovers from restaurants, eating from a backpack that their child has brought home from school, even counting a blessing bag from our church as their main meal.

The way they eat stands in stark contrast to the great banquet depicted by Isaiah: rich foods, aged wines, the fattest of meats, more than enough for everyone.

No more bread lines, no more pantry meals, no more WIC vouchers or food stamps needed: everyone, all, all, all, all, all will be abundantly fed.

Things that are not right, not fair, not sufficient will be made right, once and for all, at this banquet, on holy mountain, around this table, says the Lord.

Novelist Amit Majmudar has written a beautiful book called *The Abundance* about three generations of an immigrant family from India who have come to America to begin new lives here.

The narrator of the book is the elderly mother, who has brought a piece of her old world culture with her, literally, by smuggling a test tube full of yogurt culture from home when she emigrated from Gujarat to Ohio to make sure she could make the traditional *dahi*, or yogurt, from this "dynastic succession."

As the story unfolds, this elderly mother is diagnosed with terminal cancer, and she subsequently discovers her identity, comfort, and stability in feeding her dysfunctional family traditional meals from the old country as she goes about, as she describes it, "the slow sloppy business of dying."

As the narrator grows weaker, her daughter, Mala, becomes determined to learn all her mother's recipes and to enjoy *being present* with her family and together with her mother, as they repeat the cooking rituals *of the past* and eat together as a family now,

regardless of *what future* days may look like.

Past, present, and future become a seamless unity by what happens around her table.

The last chapter of the book is about Thanksgiving, the American holiday,

which they hated when they first came to America because of its
strange custom of turkey genocide.

But now as they, too, are thankful for the life they have discovered in America,

Mala prepares a traditional Indian meal for the American holiday
on her own, or as her mother says, "without my hand on the bicycle seat."

(Majmudar, p. 251)

After the mother fills her plate first with *palak paneer, rice, rotli, chole, dahi,*

her son guides her to her chair while her husband brings a glass of water.

And as she takes it all in with her tear-filled eyes, the mother notes:

"The full plate, full bowl, full glass are set before me.

For a time while everyone else takes their food, I sit before mine motionless.

When they are all seated, I take my first bite.

Mala urges her family, making sure they take enough,

promising them there is more." (Majmudar, p. 252)

It is a picture of comfort in the midst of discomfort,

of thanksgiving in the midst of grief,

of abundance in the midst of pending loss,

of intimacy in the midst of dysfunction,

of soft caring tenderness in the midst of harsh realities.

It is what is promised to us, too, at the Great Banquet, at the perigee of God.

Caring for others, all others, all people, all nations around the table

where there is an abundance of food is a vision the prophet shares with us,

imagining what it will look like when God draws near.

It is a vision of comfort. It is a vision of joy. It is a vision of delight.

It is a vision of no more life eclipsed by the shadow of death.

It is a vision of who God is and what God wants for us.
It is a promise for all peoples, all nations, that will be made manifest in Jesus Christ.
Jesus will do as God has imagined, and our hearts will be strangely warmed,
and our stomachs will be warmly filled, and our sense of promise will
be strangely awakened as we gather around
and celebrate the abundance of the table of the Lord.
Things that are not right, not fair, not sufficient will be made right, once and for all,
at this banquet, on this mountain, around this table, says the Lord.
The thanksgiving table has been set.
Come enjoy the feast, as God in Christ draws near. Amen.