

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper
Sunday, October 31, 2021
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time**

“Heaven as an All You Can Eat Buffet”

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9



You know folks, it's getting close to Thanksgiving. You know what I love? Yams or sweet potatoes (doesn't matter which) cooked with brown sugar and then baked with those little melted marshmallows for the top crust. You know else I love? It's is large fork that has heaped on it one-third hot moist turkey breast, one-third mashed potato, and one-third cranberry sauce! Oh my! That's it. Jah. And how about a green bean casserole, cooked with that cream of mushroom sauce and those little golden crunchy things as a topping (I don't know what those

golden crunchie things are, but they are only served on a green bean casserole)? And how about some cold milk to wash it down? Oh, wait! But first, a sip of red wine. Ah! That's it. That hits the spot. For dessert we are having an amazing strawberry rhubarb pie that is just sweet enough, but has this little hint of sour tart. Of course, the sweet whipped-cream takes the pucker out of our cheeks. Sounds like *heaven* doesn't it?

Well, we who live over 2,500 years later seem to have the same minds and stomachs as our Hebrew Ancient Near East ancestors in faith. They too valued their food and desired their feasts! They often described feasts that God would serve on what was often called the 'Day of the Lord'.¹ The Day of the Lord was what many today refer to as the 'end times' or the 'apocalypse'.² And on this day, when everything comes to a head and all in the world is made right and perfect, it was envisioned that God would serve a sumptuous buffet to all nations (Ezra 9:19, I Enoch 62:12-14, Luke 22:16-18, Matthew 22:1-10, Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, I Corinthians 11:26, Revelation 19:6-9).³

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*, see "The Wedding Banquet", (New York: Convergent, 2019), 172-174.

² William Millar, "Book of Isaiah (First Isaiah), Isaiah 24-27 (Little Apocalypse)", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3, David Freedman, ed. in chief, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 488-490.

³ Dorothy Willette, "A Feast for the Senses...and the Soul", in *Bible History Daily*, for the Biblical Archeological Society, November 7, 2019. Found at: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/a-feast-for-the-senses-and-the-soul/>, accessed October 31, 2021.

If you think we can salivate over food, boy, could they ever. When Isaiah wrote some two-thousand, five-hundred years ago, or when Jesus lived two-thousand years ago, food, let alone good food, was almost a luxury. First of all, the caloric intake then was pathetic compared to today. Food was much harder to come by back then. Hunger and starvation were real concerns. There was no ‘Everyone Eats’ in the kingdom of Judah. Even if there was food, the variety was little when compared to what is available today.⁴ Go to Market 32 and find a hundred and fifty brands of cereal stacked two stories high. And there was no refrigeration then. You can forget ice-cream, let alone chocolate sauce. So, a description of the Day of the Lord, when all was made right with the world, inevitably was described as offering everyone, all nations, an ‘all you can eat buffet’.⁵

Twenty-five hundred years ago, there was a bit of meat. There were olives. There was bread. There was wine.⁶ Notice in our scripture reading the description of the Day of the Lord mentioned wine more than once. Wine was the best. Jesus

⁴ A.J. Jacobs, “What Would Jesus Eat? The Science within the Bible”, *oz*, by Dr. OZ, found at: <https://www.doctoroz.com/article/what-would-jesus-eat-science-within-bible>, accessed October 31, 2021.

⁵ Peter Ackroyd, “The Book of Isaiah”, “Yahweh’s Feast for the Nations (24:21-26:6)”, “The Feast (25:6-9)”, *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Charles Laymon, ed., (Nashville: Abington Press, 1971), 346.

⁶ A.J. Jacobs, “What Would Jesus Eat? The Science within the Bible”, *oz*, by Dr. OZ, found at: <https://www.doctoroz.com/article/what-would-jesus-eat-science-within-bible>, accessed October 31, 2021.

knew that (John 2:1-11).⁷ And not just because it made you feel good. But because it was safer to drink than water and it just seem to be, well, divine.

I wonder, for each one of you, what would be on offer for you when God restores everything? What will you enjoy when, as the scriptures foretell, “every valley shall be filled in and every mountain made low”, “the crooked roads shall become straight and the rough ways smooth” (Isaiah 40:4 and Luke 3:5), and all that is wrong with the world is made right? Dart and Joy, perhaps you find all the world a tropical shore. Bonnie, for you, existence is under a waterfall in a Tibetan mountain with you ‘Doggie-lama’. I know for my daughter, when God restores the world, she is having a pedicure, forever, in the luxury spa of a five-star hotel. Me? What’s all being made right for me? I think it is being able to listen to a lecture *by God*, forever, on the history of the Anglo-Boer War.

Unlike their faith ancestors living during Isaiah’s time, Palestinians living during Jesus’ time began to conceive of a sort of *private* ‘Day of the Lord’ that was individual *as well as* the collective ‘Day of the Lord’. Jews during Jesus’ time debated the existence of this afterlife and thus the existence of what we refer to as ‘heaven’. Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife and Pharisees did. No matter if we conceive of a collective ‘Day of the Lord’ or a private ‘Day of the Lord’ after

⁷ See also, Luke 15:11-32 (Prodigal Son) and the Last Supper (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and John 13. Dorothy Willette, “A Feast for the Senses...and the Soul”, in *Bible History Daily*, for the Biblical Archeological Society, November 7, 2019. Found at: <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/a-feast-for-the-senses-and-the-soul/>, accessed October 31, 2021.

our earthly lives, the concept is the same: God restores all things, all is made right, and a buffet with wine comes with it!

So, what is this so-called 'heaven' like? Millions have wondered and thousands have tried to describe. (All fell sort. Except for me. I have it all figured-out!) Heaven is, one, **the state of having in abundance something that we feel is scarce in our lives, and, two, something that when we have it, we want it forever.** For those like the prophet Isaiah, food and wine met those two qualifications and therefore when the Day of the Lord was mentioned, food and wine were present. For those like the woman at the well, heaven was the provision of water, 'living water' (Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13), that never ceases (John 4:1-26 and John 6:35). For some of us, we have led hard lives and peace is scarce. We deeply yearn for a peace that lasts forever. Is heaven then, for you, the provision of peace? For those who were slaves before our American Civil War or for those who are mass incarcerated today, heaven is the provision of freedom. For those who are ostracized from society, such as the gay, lesbian, and transgender communities, heaven quite simply, feeling like they are finally accepted and belong. Many experience the failure of their bodies and thus suffer from pain. Is heaven, for you, the absence of pain? How many of you feel a scarcity of love, and deeply desire to feel and give it forever? Is heaven, for you,

the provision of abundant and overflowing love? For those of us who are deprived of that which we have earned, heaven is the establishment of justice.

This Sunday is All Saints' Day. Today, we honor and respect those loved ones who have transformed this past year. It makes a great deal of sense today to wonder aloud, "What are the saints we remember today experiencing in heaven?" Well, given my earlier stated definition of heaven, I suppose that it depends on who the saint is or who we are. According to my definition, that which they or we lack or feel is scarce and that which they or we want to last forever is that which is provided in abundance and forever in heaven!

Now some, like our dear Carlene McCarty who just lost her precious mother at the age of 95, may justifiably think to herself, "Scott, that type of fill-in-the-blank answer is a cop-out. I want a real answer to the question, 'What is heaven like?'"

To Carlene, I say, and to all of you, that which we feel is scarce is 'the presence of God'. And it is the 'the presence of God' that we want to last forever and ever. And I would like to describe heaven further by asserting that the ultimate presence of God, at its fullest, is complete union with God. The forever tenure of this union with God suggests that heaven is the perfect realization of that which the case already, just dimly and imperfectly (I Corinthians 13:12), realized. And thus, heaven quite simply is **the state of our full divinity in union**

with God who Created us. Perhaps Richard Rohr said it best when he spoke of Holy Communion, the Eucharist, as a ‘heavenly banquet’. He said: “The Eucharist tells us that, in some mysterious way, we are God having a human experience”.⁸

Today, we also honor the members of the Silver and Golden Bells societies. They are the *living* saints among us who perceive only dimly that which the saints who have transformed this past year already fully realize: a full and perfect fusion, grafting, imbricating, union with God. With gravy on top!

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the People of God responded, “Amen!”

⁸ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*, (New York: Convergent, 2019), 137.