

“Bread for the World” based on Isaiah 25:1-9

In 2005 I was commissioned as a probationary Elder in The United Methodist Church, and immediately thereafter I went to Cuba on a Volunteer in Mission Trip (VIM). Cuba was fascinating and the trip was meaningful and educational. We started and ended our time in Cuba at the Methodist Hospitality House in Havana. On our last night, we were to have closing worship and the other clergy on the trip informed me that I was to preside at the communion table (for the first time). As a seminary student, I'd been involved in a lot of conversations about bread and grape juice; particularly around the idea that the the bread and wine that Jesus had used were the common elements of food for the people of his day, and that in places where bread and grape juice are not common food, perhaps they should not be the elements of communion. I found it convincing, particularly after having learned that grape juice is SUPER expensive in Cuba as grapes are not native and embargoes limit trade.

Thus, I decided to preside over the table with the elements of the people: salines and mango juice. Once our Cuban hosts heard about this, they wanted to partake as well. So, in one of those strikingly holy moments of life, I stood as an American woman in a rooftop in Havana, and presided over a bilingual communion service with salines and mango juice.

Not so long after that, I was back at school and back at my pastoral internship, helping to serve a Thanksgiving meal at the Hollywood UMC. It was a Sunday night, and the large room was filled with tables and the tables were filled with people. After serving most of the crowd, I looked up. What I saw took my breath away. It was the church's Thanksgiving Dinner, so many of the people who were present were church members; but they also made all meals open to the community, so many of those present were people who were homeless and hungry. The two crowds were intermingled at each table, sitting together and sharing a meal. The tables were diverse in other ways as well: age, race, country of origin, sexual orientations, gender identities, and even religious faith. On that day when I looked up and saw God's beloved people talking, laughing, and eating together I knew I'd seen the kin-dom of God on earth (if only for a moment).

Somewhere along the line, those two powerful moments have bonded in my brain, the communion meal intermingled with the shared meal of church

fellowship that also fed the hungry. Perhaps they were tied together by the reflections of Rev. Dr. Barbara Thorington Green, who often speaks about the ways that God's Table (communion) invokes and also blesses the tables we share fuller meals at. Food is sacred, shared food even more so, and whether it is meals that fill the belly or tiny pieces of bread meant to satiate the soul, they matter.

Isaiah shares a vision of God in our reading today, and it is one that invokes and expands both of the stories I just told you. In this passage God prepares a table, a feast actually, of rich foods that would nourish bodies, and invites ALL people from ALL nations to the feast. God makes the food, for God's people, and all can eat together. It is so spectacular, so marvelous, that it makes sense that within such a God-drenched experience that God would also bring an end to death and bring God's presence fully to the people.

Abundant, life-giving food, prepared for ALL people by God's own self is equivalent, it seems, to swallowing up death itself.

This is not the world we live in. (Sorry to break it to you.) Death is here, still. Abundant, life-giving food is not available to all of God's people, and while the presence of God may be here with us, we often don't feel drenched in its goodness. According to the resources provided by Bread for the World, “Nearly 15 percent of U.S. households — approximately 49 million Americans, including 15.9 million children — struggle to put food on the table.”¹ The problem is not limited to the United States. They also share, “The number of hungry people in Asia has also declined substantially, by 217 million between 1990-92 and 2012-14, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. Yet Asia still has to two-thirds of the world’s hungry people.” Specifically, “More than 40 percent of children in India are stunted (being too short for their age group) due to malnutrition.” The other area of the world in greatest need is sub-Saharan Africa, “Just over a quarter of the world’s undernourished people live in the countries south of the Sahara Desert in Africa. Progress against hunger has been slow in this region. In 1990, one in three people in the region were undernourished. Today, one in four suffer from hunger”.² “All added up, worldwide, 1.2 billion people still live in extreme poverty—on less than \$1.25 per day.”³ This is WAY down from the recent past, but still unacceptable.

Bread for the world links to the United Nations Sustainable Development goals, which include the information that “In 2016, an estimated 155 million children under age 5 were stunted (low height for their age), down from 198 million in

2000, ”⁴ and “The proportion of undernourished people worldwide declined from 15 per cent in 2000-2002 to about 11 per cent in 2014-2016. ... Globally, about 793 million people were undernourished in 2014-2016, down from 930 million in 2000-2002.”⁵ The decline in global hunger is a great thing, but it is still way too much.

We don't live in a world where abundant, life-giving food is available to all of God's people, not at all. And while global poverty and hunger was on the decline this year (praise God!), within the United States it rose, and is expected to keep rising. In previous years we have participated in the Bread for the World offering of Letters, asking our state and federal elected officials to pass expansive legislation to make food available to hungry people, this year we are aware that it will fall on deaf ears. We aren't fighting to expand programs to hungry people anymore, we are now fighting to keep resources that exist, insufficient though they are.

It is especially difficult right now, in the US and in the world, because the impacts of Global Climate change are drastically impacting food production, droughts and floods, wars and migration, transportation and food prices. All of this means that access to abundant, life-giving food is very difficult for many. Thanks be to God for the many organizations committed to finding ways to get food to hungry people, and thanks be to God that in the world at large there was a DECLINE in hunger despite these extra challenges!!

Isaiah's dream, however, still feels far off. I want to retell you the dream, in slightly different language, because I think we all need to soak in it a bit.

Our God, the one who never abandons us, the one who holds us together,

We remember all that you have done,

all the acts of liberation, and justice,

all the ways you've sparked creativity, nurtured love, and healed brokenness.

You have acted, and you have guided us to destroy the fortresses of oppression,

and you ensure they will never be rebuild.

The powers that deny anyone's humanity are over.

The systems that privilege one over another are no more.

Awe has struck all of us, the strong and the weak alike, at what you can do.

You have reminded us of your values, and brought them to life.

You are the sanctuary for the poor,

the one who is safe shelter to those in need and in despair,

protection from from hurricanes and rainstorms,

a fireproof haven from the sun and from the fires,

a sturdy foundation that not even an earthquake can harm.

When the powerful attacked the weak,

like a blizzard attacking a disintegrating home,

when the cries of those calling for injustice

seemed to drown out the voices calling for justice,

you acted.

You provided reinforcements and insulation for the homes,

you reminded those calling for injustice of their own needs,

and they stopped yelling and started listening.

Here, here in this place,

this place that has known such tragedy,

fear, anger, sadness, and despair,

here in this place you will give gifts to all your people.

One will sit by another, and no characteristic of humanity will separate them.

Here, in this place, you feed us all with delicious food,

nourishing us, healing us, reminding us of goodness once again.

Here, in this place,

comfort will be shared,

tears will be dried,

shame will be destroyed,

and death itself will lose its power to frighten us or bring us pain.

Knowing that this will happen, let us be glad and rejoice in the goodness.

Commentators say that this vision won't necessarily come true exactly as written. [#spoileralert](#) Yet, I'm told that we can't be part of creating what we can't dream of, and we can't see what we can't conceive of. In the midst of the brokenness all around us, we need reminders of what goodness looks like, what hope would create if it could, what dreams God is dreaming over the long run. Some of us (me included) are so busy being concerned about the present that we lose sight of the idea that God is very good at playing a very long game.

So, bread for the world, that's the dream. All people being fed with abundant, life-giving food. Isaiah says not just bread but delicious soups and sauces, not just food but drink as well. No one going hungry, no one in need, not in body nor in soul.

That's one of God's dreams, and it is surely a God sized dream. Bread for the World and the United Nations are actually dreaming it with God, the goal is to eliminate hunger in the world by 2030. They say it is going more slowly than the hoped – but it is GOING. God's dreams might just be in reach, this one and all the rest as well. May we take the time to soak in the goodness of God's dreams, to trust in the visions God has for an abundant and just world, and give our attention to what might be – God is so good the dreams and visions are nourishing for us. Amen

1Bread for the World “About Hunger”

<http://www.bread.org/where-does-hunger-exist> accessed on 10/12/17.

2Grassroots Advocacy Resources, Facts on Hunger and

Poverty, <http://www.bread.org/sites/default/files/downloads/gar-issues-poverty-hunger-us.pdf> accessed on 10/12/17.

3Grassroots Advocacy Resources

4United Nations, The Sustainable Development Goals Report

2017, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2017/TheSustainableDevelopmentGoalsReport2017.pdf> accessed on 10/12/17.

5United Nations

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