**Weekend of Sunday, October 15, 2023**

**20th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 28/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9**

**Second Reading: Philippians 4:1-9**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 22:1-14**

**Sermon Title: *“*Rejoice in the Lord's Feast: Embracing God's Abundant Love*”***

**Theme**

*In Isaiah, we are given a vision of the great feast to come, when God will wipe away death forever. In Jesus’ parable about a great banquet, those invited do not come, so the invitation is extended to others. In our liturgy, God spreads a table before us. Even amid anxiety and hardship, we rejoice in the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. With great joy, we feast at the table of the Lord, and we go forth to share the wonderful invitation with others hungering and thirsting for the abundant life of God.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 25:1-9**

*After a hymn of praise acknowledging God as a shelter for the poor, the prophet portrays a wonderful victory banquet at which death—which in ancient Canaan was depicted as a monster swallowing up everyone—will be swallowed up forever. The prophet urges celebration of this victory of salvation.*

 1O 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.
 2For you have made the city a heap,
  the fortified city a ruin;
 the palace of aliens is a city no more,
  it will never be rebuilt.
 3Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;
  cities of ruthless nations will fear you.
 4For you have been a refuge to the poor,
  a refuge to the needy in their distress,
  a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.
 When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,
  5the noise of aliens like heat in a dry place,
 you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;
  the song of the ruthless was stilled.

 6On 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.
 7And he will destroy on this mountain
  the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
  the sheet that is spread over all nations;
  8he will swallow up death forever.
 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.
 9It will be said on that day,
  Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.
  This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
  let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

**Second Reading: Philippians 4:1-9**

*Though writing from prison and facing an uncertain future, Paul calls on the Philippians to rejoice and give thanks to God no matter what the circumstance. God’s peace is with us and binds together our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, especially when things around us do not seem peaceful.*

1My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

 2I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.
 4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

 8Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

**Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14**

*Jesus tells a parable indicating that the blessings of God’s kingdom are available to all, but the invitation is not to be taken lightly.*

1Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ 5But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ 10Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.
 11“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. 13Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ 14For many are called, but few are chosen.”

**Sermon**

And now the exciting conclusion to the 2024 Annual Stewardship Campaign entitled, “Where Your Heart Is.”

Over the last couple of weeks, we have explored two crucial aspects of our stewardship journey—the use of our *treasure* on the weekend of October 1, and our *time* on the weekend of October 8. This week we will focus on the use of our *talent*. And that reminds me of a story I once heard. I’m told this is a true story:

A small-town preacher was proud of his ability to improvise a sermon on any topic, even if he knew nothing about it. He never prepared, just improvised on whatever came to his mind Sunday morning. So one Sunday morning he woke up and told his wife, "I'm going to base my sermon today on horseback riding."

"But you don't know anything about horseback riding!" she said. "I don't want to watch you embarrass yourself, I'm staying home."

"All right," he said and drove to church. On the way there, he began to have second thoughts. He really didn't know anything about horseback riding. Finally, he decided to preach a sermon on love and intimacy in marriage.

It went very well -- so well that when one of his congregants saw his wife at the grocery store the next day, she said, "You missed a great sermon yesterday -- your husband was on fire! That was the best sermon I've ever heard!"

His wife said, "Really? He knows nothing about it. In all his life he's done it just twice -- once before we were married, once after -- and both times, he fell right off."

Our theme, "Where Your Heart Is," is rooted in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ found in Matthew 6:19-21. Allow me to read it to you again:

19"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. "

These verses remind us that our hearts are deeply connected to how we use our gifts of treasure, time, and talent. Before we explore the parables and teachings prescribed for the day, let us focus on verse 24, which follows the passage on treasures in heaven. Jesus declares,

24"No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. "

These words challenge us to consider where our hearts truly lie. Are we consuming all our time, talent, and treasures, which are fleeting, to serve our own selfish desires, that which Paul calls the desires of the flesh? Or are we devoted to serving God, the eternal source of all that is good? Our use of these gifts reveals our allegiance.

Turning to the prophecy of Isaiah, we encounter a magnificent passage, the first half of which is about the worship of our God. And in the second half, the prophet Isaiah paints a vivid picture of a great feast on the mountain of the Lord. It is a banquet of rich food and fine wines, a feast of salvation, where God Himself wipes away tears from every face.

The unexpressed question is this, “What can we give to God for all His many benefits?” The honest answer is, that God who created all there is asks *nothing* of us – at least nothing of material substance - but God craves our attention and devotion, and delights in our worship.

Two weeks ago, Zion’s bell choir and vocal choir and a few soloists performed a concert for us. If you were not here, in a word it was “magnificent.” Those musicians practiced for weeks for that event.

Yes, it was for our entertainment – but speaking only for myself, I worshiped while they sang.

Yes, it was recorded for posterity – and now anyone can hear them perform at any time and worship along with them.

But I would be disappointed if I asked any of them why they used their time and talent in this way and they said something like, “I just like to sing” or “I just like the people in the choirs” both of which are probably true. Rather, I would hope they say, “Because worshiping God with my voice is how I steward my vocal talent.”

One day, their vocal talents may fail them – it can happen when we get old – but their worship will never be forgotten. They have laid up treasure in heaven.

This passage from Isaiah reminds us that our time on this earth is a journey toward a grand celebration—the ultimate feast of God's presence. The way we worship reflects our anticipation of this glorious day. Are we investing our talent in preparing ourselves and others for the heavenly feast? Or are we consumed by worldly distractions that lead us away from God's eternal banquet?

In his letter to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul offers guidance on how to steward our time and talent wisely. He encourages us to rejoice in the Lord always and to be anxious for nothing but to present our requests to God with thanksgiving. Paul's words remind us that our attitude toward time and talent can greatly impact our stewardship.

Are we rejoicing in the Lord, using our talents for Kingdom good as we navigate the seasons of our lives, or are we allowing worry and anxiety and everything that glitters to steal our attention and rob us of the joy that comes from a deep relationship with God?

Finally, let us turn to the Parable of the Wedding Feast from the Gospel of Matthew. In this parable, a king prepares a great wedding feast for his son and invites many guests. Yet, those who were initially invited refuse to come, and the king sends his servants to invite others from the streets. However, one guest arrives without wedding attire and is cast out. Throwing someone out of a party because they weren’t dressed appropriately may be disturbing for us to hear, but it’s a parable. And the parable is not about *clothing* at all.

This parable teaches us about the urgency of responding to God's invitation and the importance of being properly *spiritually* attired for the heavenly banquet. It underscores the idea that time and talent are a gift and an opportunity to respond to God's call. How we prepare for and use our talent in light of this invitation reveals the state of our hearts.

Joan Gent, our Administrator of Worship and Music, is paid staff. She is expected to be here to guide and direct our worship. If you’ve never attended another church, you may not know how blessed we are to have her. Are you aware that Joan wrote the words to our campaign hymn? Yeah, every year about this time, she just asks me what my stewardship campaign theme will be and if I would like to have a special song! That is not in her Job Description, but it is how she stewards her talent for composing.

Stephanie Chizmar, our Director of Choirs, is also paid staff. She is expected to be here to guide and direct our worship. These days, choirs are far and few between; good choirs are even rarer. But Stephanie has a way of recruiting and getting the best out of the choir, which the choir loves – that’s what they want from the investment of their time and talent as well!

Anyone who has been around Zion knows Stephanie’s voice. She is talented and professional and can elevate our worship to where it needs to be. That is not in her Job Description, but it is the way she stewards her talent for singing. At the concert, I sat with Rosemarie Kascher, who knows a thing or two about choirs and conducting, and she leaned over to me during the concert and asked, “Where did you find her? Her direction is precise. The choir responds to her every direction crisply, and that voice!” And then she said, “I need to meet her.” I made that happen.

We celebrated the talents of some of our other soloists: Dan Mook, Keri Jennings, and Michele Vargo. Talent breeds talent. People want to be a part of something successful and that is what these and many more bring to God through the good stewardship of their talents. I have to admit, though choir rehearsal rarely works into my schedule, I wished I was up there singing with them. I myself, have many hidden talents. The problem is, I don’t know where they are.

Mike Bundy and Jodi Hanousek are talented in making things look nice. Mike Pallotta is creative and talented with a tractor. They and several others are responsible for the new landscaping. When people drive by and see our beautiful campus, it conveys worship, honor, and reverence. Some might question spending that kind of money on bushes and rocks. That’s the wrong question! The right question is, “What did you do with your God-given talents?”

Becky Tennant has an eye for decorating. She picked the color palate for Crossroads and the Sanctuary and you know what? There is never a complaint of why didn’t we form a committee on that! – Why would we? We have Becky!

Others are talented in:

* Inspiring,
* teaching,
* organizing,
* recruiting,
* praying,
* having compassion,
* and doing – let’s not forget doing!

The point I am making is that we often think of stewardship as money, and it is certainly true that in our economy and culture, we need money. But that is not all we need. We need every member to mine their talents for Kingdom good. You have talents the Kingdom could use! I hope you will put them to use at Zion for kingdom good.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we conclude this stewardship sermon series, "Where Your Heart Is" in the context of talent, let us remember that talents are gifts from God, given to us for the benefit of all. The servant cannot serve two masters; we must choose between serving God and serving ourselves or any other. Only one offers eternal dividends.

May we draw inspiration from the heavenly feast described in the prophecy of Isaiah, eagerly anticipating the joy of God's eternal presence.

Let us heed the advice of Paul in his letter to the Philippians, choosing to rejoice in the Lord always and to use our talents wisely for His purposes.

Finally, may we be like the wise guests in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, properly attired in the gifts of God, ready to respond to God's invitation with open hearts and prepared lives.

May our hearts be fixed on God, our talents used for His glory, and our lives be a testament to our love and devotion to the one true Master—our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

**Prayer**

Ever-present God, your blessings to us never cease and you have already prepared a place for us to dwell with you in eternity. As we conclude this annual stewardship campaign and think about our faithful response to all your many blessings, send your Holy Spirit to us so that our response is made true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy. For three weeks we have pondered where our hearts are. Let it be said today, that our hearts are in Jesus Christ and him alone. We pray this in his holy name. Amen