

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)

THE CITY OF THE RUTHLESS VERSUS THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD

Isaiah 25:1–9

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

250 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.

2 For 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.

3 Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;

cities of ruthless nations will fear you.

4 For 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,

5 the 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.

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples

a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,

of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained

clear.

7 And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
8 he will swallow up death for ever.

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.

9 It 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.

In order to get a fuller background on the literary and historical aspects of the text, my study drew on Ralph Klein's (<http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/pentecosta2.htm#Pentecost17>) Commentary on the Old Testament Lessons and R. E. Clements, The New Century Bible Commentary: Isaiah 1-39. They both noted that the text comes from a section of Isaiah (Chapters 24-27) scholars call the "Apocalypse of Isaiah" and that no specific historical reference is discernible. However, the ahistorical character of the text does not mean it is an abstract, "timeless" message. On the contrary, it is a practical, "timely" message, one that applies to every time and place, Isaiah's and our own.

DIAGNOSIS: God's Judgment on the City of the Ruthless

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : The City of the

Ruthlessness

In the poetic, apocalyptic literary context of Isaiah 25, the generic city that is referred to in the text represents the kind of world in which all people live. What is characteristic of the city is its “ruthlessness” (cf. v. 3). It is a place that has little concern for authentic justice and even less interest in attending to the needs of the poor and the weak. To be sure, to the ruthless (meaning, those with power, those with wealth, those comfortable with city ways), the city is their grand and glorious creation—a source of pride and a symbol of their presumed excellence and invincibility. But is it, really? Only time will tell.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Fear and the City*

But if you listen a little closer to the heart beat of the city, you will hear something more than ruthlessness masquerading as human grandeur and vainglory. You will hear a heart murmur: the faint thump of fear (v. 3). Of what is the city afraid? Answer: other cities and other nations. They are afraid of all who are like them, ruthless, and who would turn their ruthlessness against them. After all, such is the tragic theme of history, as Isaiah describes it, and as future history will confirm: Assyria will fall to Babylon, Babylon to Persia, Persia to the Greeks, Greeks to Rome, Rome to the Barbarians, etc. Every city, every nation, therefore, is characterized not only by ruthlessness, but also by fear. Can you see it in our own times?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Death and the Destruction of the City*

But the fear that the ruthless city has of other ruthless cities is myopic at best. The ultimate threat veiled in the myriad of penultimate threats is the Lord of history himself. Although his anger upon fear-filled, ruthless cities and his majestic being that fills heaven and earth are hidden from view, hidden in the

ruthlessness of world history, his works are not. God is the one who destroys the ruthless city. The destruction of this city is not by accident or ultimately by human making. It is, as Isaiah describes it, among God's "wonderful things, plans formed of old," not an accident, but something "faithful and sure" (v. 1). Who can imagine that?!

PROGNOSIS: God's Salvation on Mountain of the Lord

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Mountain of the Lord*□

Human imagination ceases with the final diagnosis. The best it can muster is complaint, and Isaiah and the prophets heard plenty of complaints about their diagnosis. But God's imagination doesn't stop there! And that is the real point in this apocalyptic interlude in Isaiah's crossing of Israel with the Word of the Lord, a crossing that is ultimately meant to be for everyone: "all peoples," "all faces," "all nations," and "all the earth" (vv. 6, 7, 8). If the city is a place under judgment, marked for destruction, and run by the ruthlessness, then God is also preparing another place called "the Mountain of the Lord" where judgment is trumped, where the "the shroud of death" (v. 8) is removed, where ruthlessness ceases, where "disgrace...is taken away" (v. 8), where all feast on "rich food...and mature wine" (v. 7), and where the reality of rich and poor is no more. At this point human imagination is stirred to ask: "Where is this Mountain of the Lord?" Granted, Isaiah's poetry is limited in details. The most specific we can get from him is Mount Zion, the Mountain which had once hosted the already destroyed city of Jerusalem. For more details on the specific identity of the Mountain Isaiah encourages his audience to "wait" (v. 9). Still, for us, the wait for more details is over—at least in part. For us, the Mountain of the Lord has been further identified as the place of Jesus' crucifixion, Mount Calvary. Jesus is our God, bringing salvation to all peoples

through what he has done for them on that Mountain (cf. v. 9). He is God the Son, in the flesh, who on the cross endured our ruthlessness, judgment and death. He is God the Son who by his resurrection has taken away the veil of death and “wiped away” the tears of the city.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Waiting in Faith*

To be sure, we know more details than Isaiah did about the historical, messianic process by which God would historically fulfill his promise to save all people. But further truth be told, we also still wait for its final consummation. Apocalyptic imagination still applies to us today. We still wait both for further details of what it means that “Christ will come again” and for the historical experience of his coming: resurrection. Therefore, what’s different for us compared to Isaiah is that we know precisely for whom we wait, Jesus. “This [Jesus] is the Lord for whom we waited” (v. 9). What’s the same for us and Isaiah is that we still wait. We still wait for this Lord Jesus to deliver on what he has already accomplished in his death and resurrection. Significantly, Isaiah puts this act of waiting in the past tense. He does that because the promise of God to save is so “sure” (cf. v. 1) that to believe it is to have it—already! Waiting, therefore, is simply another word for faith. But note: to wait in faith means that something deep and significant is happening to us already! Faith is overcoming fear. Now, already, the fear that characterizes the city is being wiped away by faith in the promise of God that Isaiah has announced, that is being fulfilled in Christ.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Refuge for the Poor and Needy*

By faith in God’s promise not only is fear being dispelled in the hearts of people, but those same people begin to live a new kind of ethos right smack dab in the center of the ruthless

city. No longer do they live ruthlessly among the poor and needy but they begin to provide refuge for the poor and needy (cf. v. 4). When Isaiah praises God for the “wonderful things” God is doing, he is referring not only to God’s work of law whereby God tears down and destroys the ruthless city; he is also referring to God’s work of gospel, whereby God provides refuge to the poor and needy through those who are redeemed by God through faith in the promise. What the ethos of providing refuge for the poor and needy looks like at any given time and place is anyone’s guess. No prescriptions are given. I think Isaiah is saying “Use your apocalyptic imagination, and do whatever you can, trusting that this is the Lord’s work, something for which the Lord is well pleased.”