

PROPER 23, Year A (9 October 2011)
Stanford Memorial Church
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“Disturbing the World with God”

Isaiah 25:1-9
Matthew 22:1-14

As I thought about the biblical texts we’ve heard this morning, several rather peculiar questions kept occurring to me:

What if you threw a party and no one came?

What if you planned a victory celebration but there weren’t any losers?

What if you staged a war and no one fought?

Biblical writers seemed to relish questions like that, and they left more than a few of them unanswered. The answers they did offer tend to perplex many of us today who spend our time reading journalistic reports or expository essays, of which there are hardly any in the Bible.

Needless to say, the Bible is a strange book, and Christian history can be just as perplexing. Perhaps, like me, you read the Bible and the many strange stories from Christian history and you try to, well, make sense of them.

Moral theologian David McCarthy, however, has wondered if some of these strange religious stories aren’t supposed to make sense. Or perhaps they’re supposed to make a different kind of sense or scramble our usual ways of thinking and interpreting so we can see something new. As McCarthy puts it, perhaps these strange texts and stories are supposed “to disturb the world with God.”

I find that intriguing, and I’m wondering whether that can be a helpful lens through which to read the peculiar texts we’ve heard this morning.

The ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah described his own world-disturbing moment in the midst of ruined cities that were reduced to a heap of rubble, never to be inhabited again.

Disturbing, yes, but not necessarily bad news, at least not for Israel. Those ruined cities were once occupied by the very people who had laid waste to Jerusalem and carted God’s people off into exile in a distant land – or I should say, they carted off the ones they hadn’t already maimed or killed.

So here Isaiah employs one of his favorite rhetorical strategies that runs throughout the entire book. It’s the same strategy that Hollywood filmmakers can’t seem to get enough of: the reversal of fortune for the underdog who, in the end, comes out on top. Hooray!

Isaiah draws on that familiar trope as he opens this chapter by praising God for all those once-hostile cities that lay in ruins; ruthless nations will now fear God rather than striking terror in others.

We should pause and note here that there is likely more than one Isaiah lurking around in this text. Biblical scholars suppose that there were at least two and maybe three distinct

writers reflected in this book, and perhaps even a fourth one, who stitched all those bits and pieces together at a later time.

Whoever did that final editorial quilting had the advantage of retrospective vision, of looking back on Israel's history with the blessing of hindsight and noticing what those who actually lived through those terrible moments could not have seen or known. Or to paraphrase the 19th century theologian Soren Kierkegaard, we live our lives forward but can only understand them backward.

And with that, any resemblance to Hollywood's version of reversed fortunes abruptly ends. Isaiah's retrospective vision peers through the haze of historical catastrophe and sees something startling: God's covenant with Israel was never meant for just Israel alone.

Yes, Israel's fortunes are reversed but that blessing is intended for "all peoples." What now sits in ruins will become a table for feasting, for a "feast of rich food" for everyone. God does this, Isaiah declares, for "all the nations," and this includes presumably even those who caused the disaster of exile in the first place.

Now that surely qualifies as a "disturbance." Extending the reach of divine abundance to those considered unworthy of it surely counts as a moment of disturbing the world with God. For some, that's a bit like the religious version of running your fingernails down a chalkboard.

So get ready, Isaiah seems to say, when God puts on a feast, the guest list will be surprising if not disturbing.

But what if you threw a party and no one showed up?

What if you threw a party, a big banquet, and all the people you don't like showed up?

What if you planned the banquet to top all other banquets and all the people who aren't like you at all showed up?

Those are at least mildly disturbing questions, but the parable we heard from Matthew's Jesus this morning takes those questions even further.

A colleague of mine, a New Testament scholar, reminded me recently that in ancient Greco-Roman culture it was not uncommon for a local king or a governor to throw a big party and invite all the important and wealthy people, the town's A-list. It would be a great occasion and a command performance.

Needless to say, all the B-, C-, and D-list people would not be invited – not least because they wouldn't have the proper clothes to wear. Instead, all those non-A-list people would pay for such a party in one way or another, either by acting as servants or just by going hungry.

So when Jesus starts his parable by saying that a king threw a party, his original hearers – decidedly not A-list people – would have known exactly what he was talking about. And just as they started rolling their eyes and probably groaning over hearing yet another familiar story of class warfare, Jesus shifts the ground under their feet.

No one came to the party.

What? But wait, that would be deeply offensive and social suicide; the king would be really ticked off!

Indeed he was, Jesus says, so ticked off, in fact, that he invited the whole town to come instead, just for spite.

What? But wait, that would be people like us! You mean we get to go to the party, too? Well, yes, but here's the thing. There was this one guy who didn't wear the proper clothes to the party and the king got just as ticked off as before. So that guy got tossed out, and not just to the streets but to that place of unending pain, suffering, and death. End of story.

Quite frankly, I don't like this story. A lot of other commentators in Christian history haven't liked it, either. Many of them have performed elaborate textual gymnastics with this parable to try to make it more palatable, easier to hear, less troubling.

Of course, I suspect this parable is a bit more troubling to typically A-list people than it is for non-A-list people. But there's plenty of trouble to go around for everyone in this story.

Perhaps this parable is supposed to be troubling and rather disturbing.

Jesus often starts his parables by saying, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like this or that." In this passage, however, Jesus says, "The Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to..."

Well, compared how? Favorably? Equitably? In contrast to? Jesus doesn't say. I don't know how much we can make of that textual difference, but it does make me wonder:

What if the Kingdom of Heaven isn't like this story at all?

What if God's Kingdom doesn't resemble any social organization or cultural institution we have ever heard of?

What if God is not like any king, or governor, or president (for that matter) that we have ever known?

What if God doesn't have any favorites and doesn't keep a heavenly A-list, but instead pours out love and delight on all with equal abundance?

What if God's justice and God's grace and God's compassion and God's generosity completely scramble everything we have associated with those words in the past?

Questions like that suggest to me one of the ways that the Bible can disturb the world with God: by calling our assumptions into question, even our most cherished assumptions and habits of living, and especially by stretching our imaginations.

Surely the world today needs that kind of divine disturbance, something to jolt us into imagining a world beyond what everyone else thinks is even possible.

Does anyone imagine a world beyond a perpetual war on terror anymore?

Can we imagine a world where no one fights or kills because of religion?

Can the world imagine a mosque sitting on the edge of New York's Ground Zero memorial park?

Is anyone today imagining an economy of shared wealth?

Can we imagine a world where more than just a tiny fraction of the population controls nearly half of the world's wealth and resources?

Is a tattered social safety net in a devastated environment the best we can do? Really?

Isaiah looked at the heap of ruined cities and imagined a table for feasting. But his theological imagination took him even further.

A single community returning home from exile is good, but not enough for the God of Isaiah's imagination.

Preparing a feast for both friend and enemy alike is even better, but still not enough for the God of Isaiah's imagination.

All the nations streaming to God's holy mountain, where death shall be swallowed up forever and where God will wipe the tears from every eye – that's the God, Isaiah declares, we've been waiting for.

What about us? What kind of God are we waiting for? Who do you imagine that God to be and to do?

What do we do in the meantime – in this, well, mean time while we wait?

I believe both Isaiah and Jesus would have us discern, creatively and imaginatively, how to live as God's people in the world today – especially how to live as witnesses to the God who disturbs a culture of death with visions of abundant life, and not just for some but for all.

Amen.