

Set the table

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Why do we eat soup during Lent? The question from a church member caught me a bit off guard as I was scrambling to get a few things together for a soup and bread Lenten lunch that our church was hosting last week. I don't remember exactly how I responded. I think I vaguely gestured toward Lent being a season for embracing self-discipline and simplicity.

"The general idea," I said, "is that we choose not to eat as much or the same as we might during other times of the year as a way of remembering that we do not live on bread alone—to acknowledge, even in the context of abundance, that our deepest hunger is for God." I pointed to the idea that fasting is a way of acknowledging that there is an unfinished quality to our world and to our human experience—that things are not yet as they should be, that we are not yet as we should be.

But Christianity is not just about fasting, it's also about feasting.

During a recent trip to Palestine, I had the opportunity to meet George. George and his mother live in Bethlehem, where they have a restaurant on the bottom floor of the building they live in. The restaurant was doing well until an eight-meter wall that separates Israel from the West Bank was built right in front of their building, cutting them off from potential customers, and surrounding them in a cul-de-sac of ugliness. Then, in the early 2000s, the Israeli army decided that George's house and restaurant would be a convenient location from which to do surveillance and to keep tabs on the Palestinian refugee camp on the other side of the wall. Over the next decade or so, customers would be replaced by soldiers. Or by emptiness. The wall has largely taken care of potential street traffic. Rather than looking out at the bustling streetscape that had once existed outside his front door, George now sees nothing but an ugly grey slab of concrete.

The group I was traveling with went to George's restaurant for dinner one night. It was difficult to find the place in the dark. There was no signage and the streetlights, such as they were, were very dim. The wall makes things darker in both daytime and

nighttime, it turns out. But we eventually found the place. We entered the building and were greeted by a warm smile from George and his mother. The place looked old and a little run down. There were lights burned out in creaking chandeliers. The tables looked dusty. It was cold. The sadness of the place seemed to almost seep out of the walls. There were no other customers. But every table was meticulously set. For one night, at least, there would be laughter and smiles and friendship and a lavish feast.

Over the next several hours, we dined like royalty. There was hummus and bread and baba ghanoush and innumerable salads, and lamb and chicken kebabs, and baklava and strong Arabic coffee and all kinds of other dishes that I frankly couldn't identify but which were delicious nonetheless. George buzzed around the place like a bee. While his mother was busy in the back, George ferried the food out continuously. He spoke little English, but his smile lit up the room.

In the midst of hardship and struggle and grinding indignity, George served us a feast. In the context of scarcity, we were seated at a table of abundance. Even though it makes little sense for George to keep his restaurant open for the few customers that trickle in, even though. He keeps setting the table, day after day. Perhaps someone will come. Perhaps they will be hungry. Perhaps there will be opportunities for laughter and celebration, even in cul-de-sacs of darkness, even in shadows of wretchedly ugly walls.

Over the last few weeks, I've thought a lot about George and his mother and their restaurant. There are so many layers of symbolism in George's existence and his determination not to be pushed aside by ugly walls and small men with large guns. But as the season of Lent draws to a close and as Resurrection Sunday approaches, I am thinking eschatologically. In this in-between time, between promise and fulfillment, between inauguration and consummation, I am reminded that as followers of Jesus, we are people of both fasting and feasting.

In the context of abundance, we need fasting to remind us that not everyone enjoys what we do, to remind us that we have a duty to the poor, to discipline our bodies and our souls, to wean us from our addiction to comfort and the easy satisfaction of our appetites.

But in the context of scarcity, we also need to eat and drink and smile and laugh to remind us that the future God is preparing for his people—the future that the church

has the task of joyfully proclaiming and embodying in the present—is one of feasting. In the most ultimate sense, Christians are defined by a feast, not a fast. The Christian hope is not the austerity of a bowl of soup and a piece of bread, but a groaning table and the celebration of friendship with God and neighbor.

As Christians, we are children not of crucifixion but of resurrection. We do not ignore the pain of the world, nor do we shrink from entering into and identifying with and owning it. We do not close our eyes and pretend that things are better than they are, nor do we piously long for an ethereal panacea to distract us from wrongs that we are called to be a part of righting.

But we cling to our conviction that the Christian narrative is always one of feasting trumping fasting, of life swallowing up death, of joy soaring above sorrow. With [the prophet Habakkuk](#), we say:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.

With George and his mother we say, though the streets are empty and the customers few, though the wall looms large and the future looks bleak, I will keep setting the table in anticipation of a feast to come.

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