

November 7, All Saints B (Isaiah 25:6–9)

## **The prophet Isaiah sings an eschatological melody.**

by [Thomas R. Steagald](#) in the [October 20, 2021](#) issue

Fred Craddock once said words to this effect: that he knew some people could do without a notion of heaven, that eternal life in that sense was not a requirement for their understanding of the gospel, but he was not one of them. He believed, wanted and needed to believe, in heaven. *Too much injustice*, he as much as answered, before anyone had a chance to ask him why.

When I heard these words, something in my soul began to sing. I found myself thinking about familiar prophetic images: the valleys raised up, the mountains brought low, all ground being level and plain; when the rich share their goods at last or go away broke and ruined; when the hungry are filled, finally, and the gluttonous turned away from the banquet.

I share Craddock's conviction about "thy kingdom come"—and yes, of course, on earth as it is in heaven. For some, the sociopolitical, eco-ethical hope of the gospel is reason and agenda enough for embracing Jesus and his programmatic reordering of the world as it is. But for others, heaven on earth, strive for it as we might, falls short of the beatific vision. There is too much injustice and too little time.

The Bible undeniably has an eschatological frame, and many sections of both Testaments are not only eschatological but apocalyptic: the old is exploding, the new is erupting. Eschatology surely frames Jesus' preaching and ethics, as it does Paul's letters. Today, some activist theologians and preachers maintain that "heaven" is a sedative, anachronistic and obsolete, a barrier to incarnational faithfulness. For them, the "kingdom (to) come" is either excised from their working creeds or secularized.

As a workaday pastor, however, I see no need for such dualism. I hear Jesus' call to advocate for temporal matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. At the same

time, I cherish the promise and comfort Jesus offers, both for a kingdom coming on earth and for a Kingdom already prepared.

Isaiah sings a song of “both” kingdoms. And chapter 25 is a descant known well to Micah (which is merely rearranged by the Revelator). It is an eschatological melody that, had we not already heard the overture in chapter 2, might sound exclusivist: a tune only the children of Israel might sing.

But there, in chapter 2: Who does Isaiah see coming to the mountain? All people. Many nations. People who have tried their own particular wisdoms and strategies, only to have wept bitter tears and experienced disgrace. If death has been the fruits of their previous labors, life is in view as they, too, come to the mountain of the Lord, to receive and live by God’s Torah, to feast on the banquet of God’s eternal provision, given first to Israel alone but now offered freely to all.

This kind of universalizing eschatology is a subtext of all our scriptures. When Christians sing, with Ephesians, of the day when Christ is “all in all,” we are but harmonizing with Isaiah 2, Isaiah 25, Micah 4, and Zechariah 8.

What a day that will be, when God will wipe away all the tears and disgrace of all peoples. And, while we are feasting on the best foods and wine, God is swallowing down death forever. A place prepared. A feast for all peoples. Wisdom enough to go around. All the old has passed away; behold, the new has come! With Craddock, I want and need to believe it. Not only because of too much injustice, but also because of inescapable mortality.

Increasingly now, as my days decrease, I find myself singing in a little clapboard church, Bradley’s Creek, where my father was the weekend pastor. On Sunday nights he was the song leader, too, and every week he invited us to call out and sing our favorite hymns. The hymns we sang were always heaven hymns: “When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder,” “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks I Stand.” Without fail, I always wanted us to sing “When We All Get to Heaven”:

Sing the wondrous love of Jesus  
Sing his mercy and his grace.  
In the mansions bright and blessed  
He’ll prepare for us a place.

A place, prepared by God. A deeply resonant image for me. It remains a favorite hymn, and not just for All Saints' Day.

Each time I stand above or beside a casket, confronting with others the grim reality of death, I stand on the promise that "through eternal ages" our Lord's praise shall ring—and that we shall sing then.

This is the promise Isaiah 25 offers us: that on the one mountain not brought low at all but raised up high enough for all to see, God will prepare a welcome banquet for all peoples, where all the nations will come to eat and rejoice.