

“Pack it Up: Snacks”

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Isaiah 25.6-9

Psalm 25.5-10

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As we begin stewardship season we also begin a four week journey – a communal trip as a congregation. This trip will prepare us for our voyage of 2022, sharing our gifts in the world. This might be the best trip ever – there will be no one in the back seat asking, “Are we there yet?” There won’t be a five-hour layover in the Atlanta airport. Your luggage won’t be lost! This trip will, however, require you to examine what you bring on the journey. We all bring something with us – gifts, talents, time, resources. Each week we will consider what the church brings on the trip of life. This congregation has many assets but we will just focus on four.

Our guiding passage throughout these four weeks is from Psalm 25. I’m using Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase. I don’t usually use his translations as much as I have been lately, but this specific translation worked so well. As the stewardship team discussed the theme of travel I came upon this passage. Scripture is full of a theology of travel. The Israelites went on a wilderness journey. Jesus’ ministry was entirely on the road, traveling from one city to another. In Acts the early Christians were called “People of the Way.” Paul traveled extensively as a preacher and teacher.

God is leading us on a journey. Our lives are journeys and sometimes we seek God’s presence at times more than others. I love that God is with us on the trip no matter what. Every road leads to God. Too often we wonder if we did the “right” thing or took the right path. Whichever way we go, even if we take a wrong turn, God is right there with us. As we prayerfully plan our budget for the 2022 year we consider what our goals are within the community. As we continue to explore how to be a Matthew 25 congregation we seek God’s will and look for God’s presence among us. This is a trip that will not only nourish us, but the community, as well.

Today, we pack snacks for the trip. Every car trip has to have snacks, right? I want you to think back to your last long car trip. What snacks did you bring with you? Trail mix and pretzels are favorites in our household. I once heard a story from a former parishioner about long car trips with her family when she was growing up. The kids all piled noisily into the back and her dad would drive. She said that her dad always had crunchy, salty snacks in the console and he would eat them the entire trip. Once, her mother thought that the snacks were unhealthy, and simply closed the bag and removed them. Within minutes he was falling asleep at the wheel. From then on, they knew that the salty snacks were a necessity for survival on their family trips.

We know food is a necessity. This congregation has accurately seen a need for food ministries in this community and has addressed it through the Food Pantry and Community Café.

You have persevered through COVID and adapted these programs to meet these needs. We can confidently say that food ministry is one of our gifts.

The Isaiah passage mentions a banquet. Food is important. Presbyterians know this and we love a good meal! Part of why pandemic has been difficult is because we haven't been able to meet for meals, one of the things we love to do – something that nourishes not only our bodies but also our souls. Scripture references food often because food is something all people need and it is a relatable metaphor.

The prophet Isaiah talks about eschatology – the end times – in our passage today. Often prophets looked to the world as it should be, as opposed to the world as it is. Prophets have sometimes been mistaken as fortune tellers, but they cannot predict the future. Perhaps they are confused with fortune tellers because they are able to have a creative imagination about how the world should look, not exactly how it will look. Prophets were the ones who called out current behaviors and could give warning of the consequences if behavior didn't change. The world we live in is broken. We have to have God's creative imagination to see the possibilities. Scripture helps us have that holy imagination – to picture what could be.

The prophet and the Israelites lived in exile for many years. There was lots of distress because of scarcity and loss of homes and families. These words, this vision of the future, was their hope. God wiping away tears, destroying death, setting a table for all – this was their hope. This wasn't just a meal, it was a feast. I love that it was an extravagant feast. This took me immediately to the generosity of this church. The Food Pantry gives not only canned food and dry food, but as much fresh meat and vegetables as they can. The meals at the Community Café are not just meals – they are healthy and delicious. I don't know that it is fully appreciated or recognized that this is not the norm for places that serve hot meals. Often places that provide hot meals make them mass produced, and they taste that way – but we have people who genuinely appreciate tasty food, who put so much time and energy into the meals, and make sure they are healthy because they care for the people who stop by the Café. Too often the thinking behind giving to people who are food insecure or who need clothing or housing is that they can receive the leftovers. But I have seen how the mindset here is one of abundance, and one of wanting the best for people – no matter their socioeconomic status. People are treated with human dignity.

When we do this, we are reshaping the world. We are telling people, “We see you, and we want the world to be better for you.” Like the prophet Isaiah offers, we are showing a glimpse of the realm of God. We are trying to show the hope of God that we have experienced, too. We are able to say, “The world doesn't have to be this way.” What is the hope that you wish to portray to our community? How does this hope help us to build congregational vitality, eradicate systemic poverty, or end structural racism – the pillars of the Matthew 25 congregation?

As you consider your financial commitment for next year, and your commitment of resources within the church and community, is this a ministry you feel called to contribute to? Do you have gifts for the food based ministries, or have you personally witnessed a need, and feel called to contribute in some way? If not, that's ok, because there are many ways to contribute your gifts and talents – this is just one of those ways.

Next week we will add more to our luggage. We will pack more because God has given us many gifts along the way. Today you should be receiving your note from the stewardship team, and next week you will receive your ticket – which is your estimate of giving. There are passports in the back for kids – if there are extra and you're not a kid, you can also take one. These can be stamped each week, and have a space for drawing and coloring.

We hope you'll not only consider your financial resources, but the gifts you have such as your time and talents and energy. Maybe you have ideas, or energy to help with worship. Whatever your gifts, may we be in prayer to determine how we will live into this journey as God's people in 2022. May we give thanks to God for the privilege to serve meals, and to be enriched by the lives of others within the community. May we continue to learn how we can best live into our calling as a Matthew 25 congregation, thanks be to God. Amen.