

Do you know where the nearest fallout shelter is? Probably not...and neither do I. But if you were around during the cold war, you may be familiar with that term – *fallout shelter*. You may even remember the symbol that identified them. Fallout shelters entered the American vernacular in 1949, when President Harry Truman announced the Soviet Union had detonated their first atomic bomb. The U.S. no longer enjoyed nuclear autonomy. The possibility of nuclear annihilation fell over the world like a pall, as the two great superpowers developed a nuclear arsenal capable of wiping out life on earth several times over. On September 15, 1961, millions of Americans opened their *Life* magazine to find a letter from President John F. Kennedy, which said in part, *My fellow Americans, nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war are facts of life we cannot ignore today*. The letter went on to explain a civil defense plan in which certain buildings would be designated as *fallout shelters*. This led to 400,000 of these signs, manufactured by the same company that gave us *sticky notes* – *Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing*, better known as 3M. Using reflective yellow paint, these signs were visible in the dim glow of a cigarette lighter, at a time when over half of Americans smoked.¹ As an enduring symbol of the cold war, this sign harkens to a time when the threat of nuclear war cast a shroud over the world.

It may not be nuclear proliferation or cold war taunts that put the fear factory portion of your brain into overdrive. But there is still plenty of peril and pessimism swirling in our world – saber-rattling among world leaders continues. The current conflict in the Middle East that seems a million miles away, until you pull up to the gas pump or grocery store checkout and realize how something so distant can threaten simple things we take for granted. But hey, at least you can go to the mailbox each day right now to learn how this or that political candidate will solve all our problems in the coming midterms. (You may sense a bit of sarcasm there.) But really, for many of us, such things are background noise to our own individual challenges – strained and broken relationships, family turmoil, financial distress, loneliness, disillusionment, and unfulfilled longings. Where is the nearest fallout shelter – a place of true safety and satisfaction? Today, the Spirit invites us to take *our mountain of problems* and perils and *head for the hills*, where *God has prepared a feast of salvation*. Hear these words in Isaiah 25:

⁶ On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. (Isaiah 25:6)

So what is “*this mountain*,” where God serves such an extravagant feast? Well, in this prophecy, Isaiah sees future events overlaid one on the other – like viewing a mountain range, with foothills in the foreground and high peaks in the distance. In the foreground, this mountain is Zion, or Jerusalem. In this sense, Isaiah sees the restoration of Jerusalem and Judah following the yet-to-come Babylonian captivity. But also in view is God’s ultimate deliverance for believers of all time – the mountain of his church and the heavenly home he has prepared for all whose sins are covered by the blood of Christ.

One problem with those Cold War fallout shelters was the inability to provide and maintain adequate food and supplies. Most shelters were in dank basements with low ceilings, with a couple drums of potable water, a medical kit, and some government-issued wheat crackers. Survival? Maybe for a brief and miserable while. But optimism for a better life? Hardly! Compare that to the mountain of God’s salvation – “*a banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines*.” Would you consider *fat things full of marrow* to be “*the best of meats*”? Probably not. That’s what the Hebrew literally says here. In wealthy cultures like ours, chunks of bone and fat are often discarded. But many consider a hunk of meat fat or a marrow-tipped bone to be prized cuts, full of flavor and nutrients. Regardless of your pallet preferences, the symbolism is clear. On God’s mountain we enjoy the finest of his heaven-prepared menu – a savory delight to be enjoyed by “*all peoples*,” he says. Even you and me? Are we – who have piled up a mountain of sin, worthy of a seat at God’s banquet table? Friends, please don’t hear this invitation and think you are somehow left off the guest list; that some moral lapse or lingering regret disqualifies you from God’s banquet table. In today’s gospel, we heard Jesus tell of the master who sent his servants to even the most unworthy, to invite them to his banquet. Is that you? Is that someone you know? No unworthy sinner is excluded. God’s grace is the secret sauce at this feast, not our tally of morality.

And look what God removes from the menu:

⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. (Isaiah 25:7,8a)

¹ <https://www.history.com/news/nuclear-fallout-shelters-were-never-going-to-work>

At this time in 2020, we were entering what was known as *the dark winter of COVID*. U.S. death rates were in the thousands daily. Many of us remember with a groan how the pandemic dominated not only the headlines, but holidays, work, church, and access to everything from healthcare to toilet paper. 5 years removed, COVID is hardly mentioned – just another of the countless layers in the “**shroud of death that enfolds all peoples**” – anything and everything that may threaten body and life. And that “**shroud**” covers us with more than mortality. It includes the sin-sick soul with which each of us is born. It includes every unholy thought, word, and deed that permeates our moments and days. It’s the death of soul to which our mortality attests, and for what God has every reason to confine us forever in hell. “**The one who sins is the one who will die,**” Scripture states (Ezekiel 18:20). Sin infects us all. And no vaccine will give us immunity...except that which God himself has prepared – the one who alone can “**swallow up death forever.**”

In words spoken every Easter and at most any Christian funeral, Paul the apostle clearly identifies the one who devours death. In 1 Corinthians 15, he says, “**Death has been swallowed up in victory...Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ**” (1 Corinthians 15:54,57). 700 years before Jesus left the tomb, the Lord set forth a vision of life that not even death can dampen. *Head for the hills*, he says, and *bring your mountain of problems to me. Give me your sin and shame; your worries and fears. Give me your death – I will swallow the bitter pill on Calvary’s cross, then rise again to guarantee forgiveness and life eternal. I will remove the shroud, so you can feast forever on the mountain of my salvation.*

And see how God treats us on this mountain:

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 25:8b)

Certainly these words point to our heavenly home. But don’t put them in a time capsule to open only when we get there. God gives these words for our comfort and strength here and now. Through Christ, God *has* “**removed his people’s disgrace from all the earth.**” Instead of being defined by our fears and failures, we dwell right now in the vitality and vibrance of forgiveness. No need to crawl into the fallout shelter of regret or inadequacy. We can take our *mountain of problems* to the mountain of the Lord, where he handles them perfectly and completely, always for our good. On this mountain, we feast on God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. We savor his promises, knowing he will always keep them. We partake of his body and blood – that which he gave in payment for our sin. On this mountain, we celebrate not a hoped-for end to our problems, but a promised reality of life that is truly life – now by faith, and forever in heaven.

Shortly before he died, I went to visit Herb. He was a Korean War veteran, and like many veterans, he kept his war experiences pretty close to the vest. He did, however, share one story. One night while on guard duty, he heard some commotion near the camp perimeter. He couldn’t see what it was. After yelling *halt* several times, he opened fire at the unknown intruder. It turned out to be a cow. With a wry grin, Herb said he and his men ate well for a time after that.

On the mountain of the Lord, we eat well, also. “**The LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food.**” The Lamb of God put himself in our line of fire and was willingly slain for our sins. *God has prepared the feast of salvation.* He has “**destroyed the shroud that enfolds all peoples.**” He has “**swallowed up death forever.**” So in every trouble of body and spirit, mind and soul, let’s *head for the hills*, and bring some other unworthy sinner with us. For on that mountain, on this day, and on our final day, we can say with confidence:

“Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

Amen.