

A Refuge for the Poor, sermon by Rev. R Randy Day, October 11, 2026

Scripture reading: Isaiah 25:1-9 and Matthew 22: 1-14

I'm going to focus this morning on the Isaiah passage, and I'm going to lean heavily on Reverend Dale Coulter, who's with Luther Seminary and wrote a really excellent commentary. I'll be using some of his thoughts along with some of mine.

He points out that if you're reading all of Isaiah up to chapter 25, you would find that chapter 25 just sort of juts out at you. There's hope here. There's good news here. I'm just telling you, if it's been a while since you read the first 24 chapters of Isaiah, it's really pretty bad: the cities are being condemned, the nations are being condemned, and God's pretty angry at everyone. You would just be shaking your head if you got to chapter 25. So here we are. It just sort of juts out there.

He says it returns the reader to the theme and the object of worship that opened up the section way back when he started. That is, the God that we have is a God who is involved in history, involved with the people, and does not want to destroy all of humanity, because this is the God who created it all in the beginning.

The text that speaks to the end lifts us up at the very moment when it just seems like there's no hope. It seems like there's nothing but evil taking over the world, that we're surrounded by destruction everywhere we look. But this passage says no. There's an interconnected landscape. There's a connection between the Creator and human beings, sinful as they may be.

So these verses burst upon the night sky, as this commentator says, reminding the reader of the God who delivers, the God who is present with us at all times.

The Lord God will wipe away every tear from all the faces. You've heard the phrase before, "Wiping away the tears." It's in Isaiah. We often point to the verse that's in Revelation. But here's the God who will come and be with us and wipe away these tears.

So, to three points he makes.

First of all, we are dealing here with the God of wonder. The chapter opens with a call to exalt and to praise the very name of God.

So Yahweh, we know, is the name of God used throughout the Jewish Scriptures, the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah uses that, but Isaiah has an elaboration of the name. His favorite name is Holy One of Israel. He often addresses God that way, the Holy One of Israel.

God's name does not point to something abstract. The name of God points to something that is very concrete, very, very concrete. This is a God who works through history. There are acts of deliverance that are nailed down to locations and times throughout what we call the Old Testament. It's not abstract.

You know, I love history, and I think this whole Congregational believes history is important, and Jewish history is very important. It tells us how God was involved with the people, how God saved them, delivered them time

and time again. These are the wonderful things that Isaiah is talking about. These are miraculous deeds of God, miraculous deeds.

And so history is important. The book upstairs, *The History of God*. You can borrow that one. Lots and lots of books about the history of the Old Testament, the history of the New Testament. You know, if you go into a seminary library, you're going to find shelves, hallways, stories full of books. You would just never imagine there could be that many books written about the Bible, the history of the Bible. There was a time that if you were going to study theology, you had to know German and French. All different languages, but the books are there.

You take a course on the Old Testament, as I did at Yale Divinity School, and the assignments are going to have you in that library. If it's about Isaiah or a certain chapter of Isaiah, you go there. It could be two whole shelves just about that one chapter. It's fascinating.

You say, "Gee, I didn't know all this existed." Well, that's why you came to seminary. Someone's going to open your eyes, open your mind, so when you go face the people in congregations, you're going to know a little something, right? A little something. You can't just come in and wing it Sunday after Sunday. Otherwise, get out. Bye. See you.

So we have these wonderful miracles. I'm quoting Coulter again.

"The God of wonder evokes wonder in His people," like the psalmist declares after the return from the exile. Quote the psalmist: "when the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream." Psalm 126:1.

We were so happy. We were like people who were dreaming.

So when you're dreaming, when you can let go of some of your worries and use your imagination, because God works through your imagination, God works through your visions, this is when you're going to be creative. This is when you're going to write music. This is when you're going to take pictures. This is when you're going to paint. This is when you're going to make an ice cream social. This is when you're going to do all these different things using your creativity.

That's what happens when a miracle happens. It opens us up. It loosens us up, so we're just not burdened down by our daily chores, and there are lots of those. But rather, we have this time when we can be caught up in the wonder of God through the bells. They were applauding for you guys this morning [pointing to the bell choir]. It was really good. Through the music of the bells, the choir last week, the other choir. These are moments when we say, "Wow, you know, I'm glad I am able to connect with God. I'm glad I can just pause for a little bit and soak it up."

The second part of the passage recounts a kind of reversal of fortune, which we find in the Bible, but we don't find too much in the secular world. You just keep climbing up and up and up and up. You get richer, richer, richer; powerful, powerful, powerful. Right? There's something about, you know, be careful climbing up the ladder because you're going to meet the same people as you come back down the ladder. You know that quote.

So here we have the reversal: the mighty are brought low, while the poor and the downtrodden are raised up. These aren't just ideas from tree-hugging liberals or whatever. This is from the Bible. The mighty will be brought down; the lowly will be lifted up; the poor will be lifted up.

The point is that the rage and the ruin perpetrated on this earthly city do not mean that God is abandoning that city. It does not mean that God is abandoning the nations at that time. But rather, God is going to strip those who are powerful and evil of their power and, at the same time, lift up the poor, lift up those who are not even seen by those in power.

That's the kind of God that we have, and God not only brings down the strong and lifts up the weak. God also destroys the false idols, because He wants this nonsense to come to a halt. Yes, I will restore the glorious city of Jerusalem. I will restore Israel. But you have to get rid of these false idols, because we don't want to keep repeating this cycle.

That's what this chapter is about, and we crave that God is still active today, because we are drowning in a sea of false idols in this country and in much of the world. God save us!

Now, the image of God as a refuge and a shade evokes a message of peace, does it not? Some of you have traveled in desert areas, or just been out in hot fields in the Midwest or here in New England, and there's the beauty of the shade.

When you think you're just about finished, there's some shade, and you feel revived. So that's the image here. The shade is a refuge. God is a refuge. God is saving us just when we think we're burning out.

The shelter does not remove the violence of the nations in this passage. It does not do that, but it preserves and protects in and through that violence. So God's protecting Israel. The violence is not going to stop; it continues. But God is protecting the nation of Israel, the people of Israel, throughout that violence.

And God acts in the same ways today. God is a refuge for us.

And this passage, if you go on to study the whole book, is referring in the future to the Prince of Peace, the Suffering Servant, which is talked about in the book of Isaiah. If you go back earlier in chapter nine, you have that great passage: the lion's going to lay down with the lamb. We love that one, right? You see it on posters. I used to have a carving in my office. The lion shall lie down with the lamb. That comes from Isaiah.

It's the same concept of the shade, the refuge, the place where God's going to save us. If a lion and a lamb can lie down together, don't you think God is going to save us from whatever trials and tribulations, whatever hurricanes are blowing us around? Yeah, God will be there.

And a third point from the commentator is that we have a God who is the God of us all. I quote him again: "the first five verses of Isaiah 25, build to a crescendo when Yahweh becomes the God of all."

Chapter 25, verse 6. The text makes it plain that God will invite all people to a very rich feast that He's preparing on the mountain. The text layers—I like this—the text layers adjectives to evoke a lavish banquet filled with food and drink.

One finds an echo of Jesus' later invitation to come to the Eucharist, to come to Holy Communion, which we celebrated just last week. God invites everyone to that table. God is inviting everyone to this feast.

And I really like this part when the commentator says, "Humanity feasts at the table of the Lord, because the Lord has swallowed up death itself."

It's right there, verse eight, chapter 25. God swallows up death itself. In the final analysis, it is not Israel or even the nations that are the enemy; it is death that must be defeated, and God swallows up death in order to give us life.

That's deeply ingrained in Isaiah, and it's certainly the backbone of the New Testament, is it not? That God swallows up death so that we might have life.

I'm going to quote Coulter's final paragraph: "Isaiah 25 compels the reader to view life from a different perspective. Its view from the end lifts up the reader, so that the moments of history can be seen in light of a divine plan."

Now, I don't believe in predestination. We can have that discussion out there at coffee hour if you want. Some of you grew up with predestination. I happen to have grown up in a branch of Protestantism that doesn't embrace predestination.

However, I do believe in a divine plan, and what he's saying here is that we'll be able to see in these moments of history, in these concrete moments when God was involved with humanity and is still involved with us today, that we will be able to see our place in the divine plan, not in a human plan, but in God's divine plan.

And I know sometimes it's hard to see. Sometimes it's bleak.

I quote Coulter again: "the faithfulness of God, with which the text begins, unfolds in concrete actions of deliverance, in which God brings peace by swallowing up death, and so demonstrating that He is the God of all, the God of all. It is God's creation that God is redeeming. God is not going to turn God's back on what God created, but God will absorb the violence, and God will bring the ruin of the very mechanisms of individuals then and individuals today who utilize violence to destroy God's plan," and that's the end of the quote.

Let me just move on. So I want to address a couple of other related things.

First of all, the issue of communicating with one another. And we talked about history, letters. Historians will go to letters that were written between Adams and Jefferson, et cetera, et cetera. These are primary sources. Letters are important.

Do any of you still write letters?

I ran across an article this week in the *Times*. The reporter says, "I received a postcard this week from my friend Sarah, who recently moved from Brooklyn to Queens, eight miles away. She says there we update each other on the weather and the price of milk. She says there's less traffic in Queens, but more raccoons, et cetera, et cetera. About as much as you could get on a postcard."

And then she goes on to reflect that when you receive a letter, you have a little bit of time for your imagination to fill in between the lines. Like, what was my friend doing that day when she wrote that? I wonder what else was going on. You know, you kind of see the whole picture.

Technology. This is the author: “The technology we have now offers the illusion of intimacy.” The illusion of intimacy. The volume, the pace, the constant flow of updates mimics the closeness created by actual conversation, but sometimes those very things, those torrents of text that we get, seem hollow. We’re not able to connect to the person that we really want to, and I think the telephone works wonderfully. You got that call yesterday. The telephone, the postcard, the letter.

There’s an essay in the *Atlantic* this week that suggests that one of the problems with dating apps—some of you may use those, I don’t know, or your kids or your grandkids—is that the dates facilitated by these apps hardly are conducive to real connection.

For more effective group activities or hangouts, people get to know one another more gradually in social settings like a church, a synagogue, a mosque. There are great places.

“The rapport forged by mail is imbued with automatic breathing room.” It’s about moving away from a format of communication that is mediated by platforms and digital systems that optimize speed, convenience, and infinite access.

We all want the speed. We’re all in a hurry. We love all that sort of stuff. Can’t wait for a postcard. Can’t wait for a letter. I want—I want everything instantly.

But sometimes we just pause and reflect. Just pause and reflect.

And I just want to say that Cheryl out in Iowa sends these wonderful letters here to this congregation. Now Heather is going to be our correspondent and answer back. But when I read those letters—[to the camera] hi, Cheryl—when I read those letters from Cheryl, I feel like I’m right there in Iowa. I can almost smell the corn. I can see the people I met when I was out there. I see the summer flowers, the fall, whatever. I feel like I’m there.

It’s a handwritten letter. She—it’s handwritten. I think she makes the notes. You unfold them. It’s all handwritten. I feel like I’m in Iowa when I read those.

Yes, Emily was cleaning out a lot of things, and she kept everything from all the kids, putting them in better containers so they’ll last forever. And she ran across this piece that was written by our youngest child, Thomas. Some of you read it in the e-news. I’ll share most of it with you now. It was an assignment in grade school when he was seven years old. The assignment from the teacher was this: “If I were in charge of the world.”

So he wrote:

“If I were in charge of the world, everything that is bad for you would be good for you, and everything that is good for you would be bad.

“If I were in charge of the world, people who are seven years old could get their driver’s license. No one could say you can’t get a car. Cars would cost \$1, and you could drive your own car when you’re seven.

“If I were in charge of the world, robots would do all the chores.” This was 20 years ago, right? “School would be half a day long. You could go home whenever you wanted to, and you could go to school whenever you wanted to, and there would be no homework.

“If I were in charge of the world, ice cream sundaes would not cost any money. You could play video games wherever you wanted, and basketball hoops would be a little taller than me, so I could dunk it.”

And the final paragraph:

“If I were in charge of the world, the whole world would have peace and kindness, and everyone would have respect.”

What would you write if you were in charge of the world? You might think about it. Pick up a piece of stationery. Even if you write it to yourself, it’s okay. What would you write if you were in charge of the world?

You know, one avenue to the peace that Thomas talked about, which I highly recommend, is through Native American spirituality. Tomorrow is Indigenous Peoples Day, and I close this sermon with a couple of quotes from Native Americans.

And I have mentioned this before. I will mention this again. The Mashpee Library is an incredible institution. You haven’t been there for a while. Get over there this week, and you’ll find that one whole wall upstairs—one wall, it’s more like this size—one whole wall is dedicated to Native Americans. The Native Americans here, the Native Americans out west, all around. So many books, so many books. I encourage you. I beg you to go there.

First is a short prayer by Jeff Ramsland. He’s a Mohawk.

“Creator made all that is and proclaimed that it is good. Creator, help us to discover in all you have made in nature the good wisdom about the interconnectedness of all things, about balance and about living in harmony. We are not above nature; we are part of creation. We live by the same laws as all other nature, and need to learn from what God has made. Creator, help us discover the power that lies in the wisdom and understanding in our role in the great mystery, in the honoring every living thing as a teacher.”

And I close with this piece by Ray Buckley, Lakota.

“Here in this place, you have chosen to be with us. We turn to the east, where the morning sun awaits us, and your light is there. We turn to the south, from which the warm winds blow, and your spirit warms us. We turn to the west, the place of the unknown, and your certainty awaits us. We turn to the north, the place of wisdom, to find your wisdom is already there, around before and behind us. Your presence is here. We open our arms and our hearts so that you may come inside. See that we are a good place for you to live. See that we are your children, and you are our God. Live in us. Amen.”