

Sometimes, history is more than just history. Imagine this image of Jerusalem from the Isaiah passage. Jerusalem, or Mt. Zion, is a city built on a hill. Before Babylon, Assyria was the region's powerhouse and Assyria was out to conquer the region.

The cities surrounding Jerusalem were already under siege and many had fallen. In a time when there were no real weapons of mass destruction, a siege is how you accomplished mass destruction.

An enemy army would encircle the city and block all routes in and out. The only food available was what was already in the city. Stored food would buy time, but eventually it would run out. Water sources would either be poisoned or blocked. Depending on how long the city was able to fend off the army and keep it from breaching the walls, death from starvation and lack of water eventually became a real threat.

Eventually the city would be forced to surrender. Once the invading army was able to breach the city's gates, death and plunder often followed.

A shroud of death hangs over a besieged city.

This part of Isaiah actually comes before Jerusalem was besieged. It comes in the part where Isaiah is still warning the people of Judah. He speaks words of judgement from God against Judah.

But his words go back and forth from judgement to the promise of deliverance. Our reading for today is one of those promises of deliverance.

What Isaiah says...in fact what all the prophets say, is that bad stuff is coming. The prophets all frame this bad stuff as a punishment for Israel's unfaithfulness and exploitation of the vulnerable. We'll talk more about that when we actually get to the prophets.

But no matter what happens, God will rescue them. God's judgement will not be the last word.

As Assyria continued their domination of the region, Jerusalem prepared for a siege. Under King Hezekiah, they had reinforced the walls and built a secret tunnel under the city wall to a fresh water source.

The day came. The massive Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem. They set up their camps. The siege lasted for months. Food scarcity was beginning to be an issue.

This image of a feast on God's mountain must have sounded mouth-wateringly beautiful to a people whose hope was waning.

As they sat under a shroud of impending death, they could remember Isaiah's words, that God would destroy that shroud.

Ultimately, the Northern Kingdom of Israel did fall to Assyria. But Isaiah kept encouraging Hezekiah and the people inside Jerusalem's walls. He assured Hezekiah that Jerusalem would not fall.

And it didn't. Although the story isn't told in Isaiah, Second Kings and Second Chronicles both tell how an angel of God came to the Assyrian army and 185,000 of them died. Some scholars think some sort of epidemic may have hit the Assyrian army. At any rate, Jerusalem was rescued...this time.

But death was not swallowed up forever. It turns out that although Isaiah's words here are embedded in history, they go beyond history. This feast on God's mountain is a foretaste of something that goes far beyond Assyria...beyond Babylon...beyond Rome...beyond our time and place.

In John's gospel, we hear about the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus becomes deathly ill. His sisters, who know who Jesus is and what he can do, send for him.

But Jesus doesn't rush to Lazarus to cure him. Lazarus dies. He is wrapped in a shroud and laid in a tomb. A shroud covers Lazarus. His sisters and his friends and family are enshrouded by deep grief.

When Jesus does finally show up, he of course does what nobody expected. He raises Lazarus. The shroud that enveloped Lazarus is removed and cast aside.

But death isn't yet swallowed up forever for Lazarus either. He will finally die. This story is also a foretaste of something yet to come.

What are the shrouds that are cast over you?

On this Sunday when we remember those who have died, we are more aware than at other times of the shroud of our own grief. Perhaps you too have lost someone whose death still has the power to bring you to your knees.

Perhaps your shroud is one of personal failure...or a failed relationship.

Perhaps your shroud is one of guilt and shame for something in your past...maybe even recent past. Maybe your shroud is one of struggling to find your purpose as aging chips away at the things in which you used to find meaning.

The whole world is enshrouded by a stubborn pandemic and its consequent millions of deaths. The existential threat of climate change is a shroud over the world. We are enshrouded by the lingering effects of racial injustice. Poverty casts a shroud over the lives of too many people.

Into all the shrouds that hang over us, all three of our readings speak hope. God will destroy the shroud of death hanging over us.

Isaiah's words are a foretaste of the heavenly banquet – a banquet or own Holy Communion foretells.

The raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of Jesus' own resurrection, not at the end of time but smack in the middle of history.

John's vision in the reading from Revelation is one of God's future...a future in which death will be no more and mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

God will remove the shrouds that bind us...the shrouds that continue to try to convince us that we are without hope and without help.

We live with an ever-present anxiety about death...our own...that of our children or grandchildren or spouse. But it's not just physical death we fear. Death is not just physical mortality – it's anything that negates life and well-being.

Today's readings remind us that we are not without hope...we are not without help. They remind us that even for those whose lives here have come to an end, we are not without hope.

But is this only some future hope? Is it a pie in the sky hope that does nothing for us in the here and now?

No. The one who is seated on the throne says, see I am making all things new.

I AM...making all things new. Present tense.

Even now, God is working to destroy the shrouds hanging over us.

If you have young adults in your life, you may have had conversations about the fate of the world. Many young people are pretty convinced that climate change in particular is a threat to our very existence, not just in the far-off future, but in their lifetime.

I remind them that when I was young, I was convinced nuclear holocaust in my lifetime seemed almost certain. But God was doing something we couldn't see at the time. Nobody at the time anticipated the essentially bloodless fall of the Soviet Union.

None of this should be cause for denial either. The shrouds hanging over us are very real. Death is real and grief is work. Like Jerusalem preparing for a siege, the shrouds hanging over us may be calls to action.

But that action is firmly planted in hope and faith in God's promise.

They are firmly rooted in the words of the risen Christ – See I AM making all things new. I am the alpha and the omega. In every ending is the seed for a new beginning.

And even death is not just an end...but also a beginning.