

December 17, 2006 - 3rd Sunday of Advent

“The Tastes of Christmas” *(Based on ideas from Dr. Steve Estep)*

Psalm 34:8, “Taste and see that the LORD is good.”

Did you like the cookies. Perhaps we can make this a new tradition in the church. Every year we will bring in and swap our favorite Christmas cookies. It is just part of the season to experience the tastes of Christmas. You probably have your own traditions too, special Christmas treats or meals that come to mind when you think of this season. A couple of those for me are Ann’s crescent and thumb print cookies. And I can remember Christmas at Grandma’s house. When a feast was set out before us on her dinning room table and we just stayed at the table all day long. We don’t want to merely smell these good things, we want to taste them. Remember when you would want a cookie or whatever mom was baking and she would say, “no, these are for Christmas!” Then she’d say, “ok, but just one!” Mmm, the tastes of Christmas!

(In our OT readings we have been looking at the life of David). When David wrote about his life with God, he used the sense of taste to describe what it was like, “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8). We are told in the Bible (1Sam 13:14) that when God “sought out a man after his own heart” to be the leader of His people, He chose David. If anyone had tasted and seen that the Lord was good, it was David. His heart was consumed with a pursuit of God. He didn’t just nibble a little on the God-life like those free samples you get at Costco (ever see the husbands sampling all the free food while their wife shops? They get a little nibble of one free sample, then go on to another counter for a nibble of another free sample. That is how people are in their spiritual lives, nibbling here and there while neglecting a feast God has prepared for them. David didn’t just nibble). No, he feasted on life with God.

We get a little glimpse into David’s life with God in Psalm 34. The psalm starts with worship. “I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips” (v. 1). When David thought about his life with God, it caused him to worship. He couldn’t help but praise God, and for good reason. David had discovered firsthand that when you call out to God, He answers. In David’s case, God answered with salvation and deliverance, provision and protection. He answered not just by being the kind of God who could get David out of the jam he was in, but by being the kind of God who could make an everyday difference. David didn’t just have a crisis experience with a get-me-out-of-a-mess God. He knew an every-day relationship with God. So when David wrote (Ps 34:8), “Taste and see that the Lord is good,” I don’t think he had a bite-sized sample in mind. David feasted on his life in God. He knew God as savior, deliverer, protector, and provider, and he wanted everyone else to get in on this life. “Taste and see.”

I think that’s why so many people have found in David an example of how to nurture a walk with God. He’s transparent. He didn’t say, “Life is always good,” but he said, “God is good.” In the Psalms we see the good and the bad, David’s joys and frustrations, victories and failures. We see the times David was upset and didn’t understand what was happening. But what comes shining through no matter the circumstance is this: David had acquired a taste for life with God.

A couple weeks ago, I mentioned my Grandmother's famous 18 egg Christmas cake. It was a big treat at Christmas time. My mother had her mother's (my grandmother's) recipe and, after my grandmother died, would make that cake every year ...until we all started having cholesterol problems. We should all have been as healthy as my grandmother's father, my mom's grandfather (we shouldn't be as nasty as he was, but as healthy. He was a tough old man). He lived to be 98 years old (probably would have lived longer, but we think the nursing home he was in wanted to get rid of him. He was always giving them a hard time in the nursing home, hit a few people with his cane. Well, the story goes that one day he was told he had to be given a bath. He refused because he said he had a cold, but they insisted and forced him to be bathed. Sure enough, he got pneumonia and died. He had put on his tombstone: "I told you I was sick!" - Just kidding). My great-grandfather was not the easiest man to get along with, he was as strong willed as he was physically strong for a man his age. He lived in the Bronx, but sometimes he would come to stay at our home for awhile. I remember the first time he stayed with us. Every morning he would take a tablespoon of this herb tonic. He said it was very healthy and insisted that I and my sisters take a tablespoon every morning also. It was the worse thing I ever had. I've never tasted anything like it. The most bitter thing you could imagine. It tasted like toxic waste, not that I ever had toxic waste, but I'm sure it couldn't taste worse than this stuff. I don't know how we got it down the first time, but after that I'd find a way to spit it out without him seeing me. We started complaining to my mother about it. She said we had to take it or we would be showing disrespect to my great grandfather. "And after all," she said, "how bad could it be?" to which I replied, "why don't you try it and see!" Well, she did, and after she did she told her grandfather, "Don't ever give that poison to my children again!" She wanted to throw that tonic in the trash because she didn't want anyone else to have the terrible experience of tasting it, either.

Let me tell you another story. This one is about my dad's side of the family. My grandfather every year would take me to NYC around Christmas time. We would go to Radio City Music Hall. Right next door was the automat...I think he was as fascinated with the automat as he was with Radio City. One year my Grandmother went to my house in Valley Stream and I stayed in Brooklyn with my grandfather. My grandfather was absolutely lost in his own home without Grandma. He couldn't find anything. Although she had left plenty of food for us, he could find anything for us to eat for lunch one day (and I didn't look because we were not permitted to open and look in anyone's refrigerator but our own). So, my grandfather made some chicken soup (I should say, attempted to make chicken soup. My Grandmother was an incredible cook, Grandpa didn't know the first thing about cooking). I tasted the soup and it was so salty my mouth just dried up. It was inedible, but I didn't want to say anything to hurt his feelings. So I put a very little amount on my spoon, closed my eyes and took another sip. My grandfather said, "Jeddie," (that's what he called me) "howa you lika the soup?" I said, "yeah, it's ok grandpa." He said, "hmm" then we looked at each other and started laughing. We both knew he had ruined the soup. When we finally stopped laughing he threw it down the kitchen sink drain.

There is a taste that's worse than any tonic or medicine out there. It's worse than a ruined recipe, and even worse than anything a person would eat on Fear Factor. It's the taste of sin and it tastes like death. The death of relationships. The death of innocence. The death of trust. It tastes like the death of wholeness, the death of peace, the death of families. Sin tastes like the death of purity. The death of joy. The death of happiness. Sin is like a cheap diet drink. It might taste OK initially but the aftertaste will get you every time. That's sin. Sins of rebellion and rejection, of unfaithfulness & disobedience. Sins of attitude like pride, anger, and bitterness. Sins of action. Sins of thought and sins of neglect. Sins we think no one else knows about. Sins we think only affect us. The flavors of sin may appear to be different but in the end it all tastes the same; sin tastes like death. The taste of sin was a "tonic" / medicine we were all going to have to take because all of us were guilty. Romans 3:23 says the wages of sin, (and we add, the result of sin, the taste of sin) is death, and it's what we all had coming.

But Christmas reminds us that when it was time for us take our medicine, God stepped in. In the fullness of time He sent His Son as a baby to come to our world and make us well. In His infinite mercy and grace Jesus took our medicine and threw away the bottle. He tasted death so we wouldn't have to. That's how the preacher in Hebrews describes it. [Heb 2:8-9NLT: "You gave him authority over all things." Now when it says "all things," it means nothing is left out. But we have not yet seen all of this happen. What we do see is Jesus, who "for a little while was made lower than the angels" and now is "crowned with glory and honor" because he suffered death for us. Yes, by God's grace, Jesus tasted death for everyone in all the world.] He tasted death, took our medicine.

Not only did Jesus taste death for us, He set the table for a feast of life. Abundant life. Joy-filled life. A life where every single day we can know intimacy and friendship with God. Jesus not only took our medicine, our bitter tonic, but He spread the table with a feast of a relationship with Him, and He invites us to do more than sample or nibble, or take an occasional taste of grace. He invites us to sit down at the table and stay there, day in and day out: at Christmas, Easter, and every Sunday in between; on Sunday and Wednesday, and every day in between. He tasted death so we wouldn't have to, and invites us to life in Him, a life I can only describe as a feast.

The story of Christmas is a lot about tastes. Ultimately, Christmas is about what God did to keep all of us from having to take the sickening taste of sin. But Christmas isn't just about a taste we want to avoid. It's also about a taste we want to embrace. It's the taste of a relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ. One of the tastes of Christmas was written about years before the Babe was born in Bethlehem when David said it well, "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

Wouldn't it be great if this Christmas we did more than sample the taste of life in Christ? (nibble on the life of Christ?) He invites us to feast on the taste of an abundant life that comes through a personal, daily, intimate relationship with Jesus. I invite you today, because He invites us: O taste and see that the Lord is good.