

## House for All People

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Disaster recovery is messy business, as we have seen in the United States and other countries devastated by war, natural disasters, and forced migration. Who makes decisions? How are land grabbers and those who profit from disaster recovery controlled? Whom can you trust when a ruptured social network is not yet repaired? You no longer know the people next door, because the ex-neighbors stayed with their uncle in another town and did not return. Instead, they gave the keys to their strange-looking nephew who is now occupying the house next door and playing loud music. Perhaps most importantly, who belongs and who does not? Can there be justice for all, and can community be re-created after such tragedy?

The author of today's passage states a vision of community that includes all these groups. A radical new definition of who is in and who is out is planted here. Membership is based not on genetics or cultural customs, or even religion, but rather on behavior. Those previously excluded from the covenant may now belong. All may fit under God's umbrella. The requirement for membership is to keep the Sabbath and obey the covenant (vv. 6-7). This does not mean that if you go to church on Sunday and recite a few spiritual laws, you are in. It means living in a certain way: "do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:17).

An extremely controversial part of this vision, then and today, is the idea that God's house of prayer might entertain, even accept other religions. Many denominations today in the growing multiethnic United States see evangelism

possibilities with new immigrant groups, especially those of other religions. It does not appear, however, that Isaiah's vision calls for people to change their religion. Instead, it invites everyone to gather under a covenant based on justice and doing what is right. Certainly Isaiah's message opens the religious door to those previously excluded based on their sexual condition (eunuchs), nationality, or religious practice. It does not even require them to change their sexual condition, nationality, or religious practice. Their strange-smelling burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted, says God. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

What defines a faithful person is not his or her sexual condition, nationality, or religion, says Isaiah. The faithful person is the one who loves the name of the Lord, keeps the Sabbath, and holds fast God's covenant. These things do not have to do with church affiliation but with a way of life that honors and protects every single creature created by God. This is the Lord who rescued a people enslaved in Egypt, teaching them how to be a nation very different from their flashy, consumerist neighbors. This God recognizes the commitment and love of those who take care of one another—along with the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

This text is great news for the hurricane or tsunami survivors who never left, scavenging a living while slowly rebuilding their home and community. It is good news for the Mexican day laborer who moved into the abandoned house next door with his wife and children. It is good news for the Palestinian Muslim refugee who was just placed in an apartment across the street. All these are gathered by the God who gathers the outcasts of Israel. Given an equal opportunity to embody goodness, justice, and caring for one another, they will be joyful in God's house of prayer. **David Maxwell**

Our text is addressed to a community returning from exile. These former exiles are not to seek revenge but to "maintain justice and do what is right" (v. 1a). For the returning exiles, the idea of justice might seem to point only to the restoration of their freed status—God working on their behalf. Instead, the call to justice is a call to look for God's action: "Soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed" (v. 1b). Salvation and deliverance are not isolationist or retaliatory. This demonstrates new directions that deepen God's covenantal relationship with the people, to open the door for foreigners to "join themselves to the LORD" (v. 6a). These new servants, the foreigners, will "minister to him" and "love the name of the LORD" Most importantly, they will "keep the sabbath, and ... not profane it, and hold fast my covenant" (v. 6b).

This acceptance is new, even though there is a tradition of welcoming strangers throughout Hebrew Scripture (such as stated in Gen. 18). This remarkable desert hospitality was reserved for those faithful to covenant living and defined one aspect of "justice." As the exiles return, however, they are instructed to go beyond caring for strangers: they must now prepare to welcome those who hold fast to the Sabbath. Such acceptance by God will bring foreigners into the covenantal relationship with the Israelites: "these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar" (v. 7).

Not included in our text are verses 2-5 that tell more of the widened invitation; in addition to foreigners, eunuchs who hold fast to the covenant will also be accepted as members of the chosen. The recognition of both eunuchs and foreigners who keep the Sabbath is a clear departure from past practices. This postexilic vision is a more inclusive invitation, thus broadening the vision of the

covenant, as two groups who have been excluded from the community of the faithful are welcomed to the altar.

The political situation of the returning exiles also emphasized the broader vision of the covenant. One author, after studying the official records of the time, has noted that there were many foreigners living in the area when the exiles returned. "Jewish, Edomite, Arab, Phoenician, and Aramaean names are identifiable."

Accepting the foreigners who live by the covenant accentuates how justice shall be maintained by the returning exiles: not with violence, but by "doing what is right."

This reminds us of the current violence in Ferguson Missouri. Last week it was like a war zone in our own country. I don't understand the circumstances of the young man's death, but stealing cigars is not a capital crime, nor does policing our city streets cause the law enforcement staff to behave like Navy Seals.

For Christians, this reading offers another level of reflection. Does this mean we are to welcome all Christians or all, even those who do not have the same faith convictions? Does evangelization mean welcoming strangers, and new memberships, but only those who want to think and ask like us? Isaiah invites new consideration of these words: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (v. 7). The invitation to all people is from God, and the community is called to respond as a matter of justice. There must be connections between inviting new members and justice if we are faithful Christians.

The former exiles and we know of God's immeasurable generosity through the divine invitation to others. At the same time, we are called to do what is right, acting in justice, remaining faithful to the covenant, and sharing God's loving-kindness. The former exiles themselves are challenged to remain open, reflecting God's own loving-kindness. This is how they and we will "maintain justice and do what is right." **Stephanie Y. Mitchem**

As the Palmist said in Palm 67:

- <sup>1</sup> May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us,
- <sup>2</sup> that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations.
- <sup>3</sup> Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.
- <sup>4</sup> Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth. *Selah*
- <sup>5</sup> Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.
- <sup>6</sup> The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us.
- <sup>7</sup> May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Isaiah tells us that God is doing "new things" and that "former things" are passing away. One of the astonishing new things that the Lord is doing is redefining Israel's relationship with foreign nations, widely expanding the purview of God's deliverance and salvation. Such salvation should no longer be seen as the byproduct of ethnicity, nationality, race, or cultic membership. It is, instead, open to all who respond with justice and righteousness, who join themselves to God by keeping the Sabbath and holding fast to God's promises. God will bring all such people to the holy mountain, where they will experience the joy of worship as their prayers and offerings are accepted by the God who has gathered them together. God's house will be called a house of prayer, a gathering of all peoples, foreigners, outcasts, and Israelites.

The story is told by Paul Brand and Philip Yancey in the book *Stories for the Heart* of a leprosy patient named John Kermegan. His hands and feet were damaged beyond repair. Because of one-side facial paralysis, John could not smile

normally, but rather showed an uneven distortion when he tried. He was angry at the world. In spite of all he had been through John became a Christian. After a lifetime of rejection and mistreatment, he asked what would happen if he visited a local church in the town. The leaders of the church were contacted, John and his situation were described and assurances were given that John's disease would not endanger when as he was not longer contagious. They agreed and were asked if he would be allowed to "take Communion." Again they agreed. As they entered the church during the singing of the first hymn, and Indian man toward the back saw them. The man put down his hymnal, smiled broadly, and patted the chair next to him, inviting John to join him. That one incident proved to be the turning point of John's life. Years later the writer visited the area again and made a side trip to a factory that employed persons with disabilities. The manager showed him a machine that produced tiny screws. As they walked through the plant, he was introduced to his prize employee. It was John, still disfigured, but productive and no longer angry at the world. A simple gesture of acceptance had changed his life. Like Christ accepts us; the Church must be a place of prayer and acceptance for all people.

God calls us boldly and relentlessly to respond to the reality of salvation and the dynamic of deliverance by embracing justice and walking in righteousness. A just and righteous response demands that we look deeply into the inner workings of our minds and hearts to identify and dismantle any internal mechanisms that cause us to demean and dismiss others, the means by which we create foreigners and outcasts: the them and the us.

Isaiah's vision of God's holy mountain invites us all to celebrate with joy the delight that God takes in the great diversity of those who love the Lord and are

united in our common worship and by our commitment to God's justice and righteousness. **Wendel W. Meyer**

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