

**Echoes: Unwelcome People**

Isaiah 56:3-8

We've been talking about different ways that faith relates to society, and last week I talked about the "Comfortable Church." This is the church that is at the center of its society, where it has great political and social influence. My biblical example was the Jerusalem temple in the time of King Josiah, when the Israelite faith (and the religious establishment) had unprecedented power in the nation of Judah. Well, surely good things happened during that time, just as there were surely priests who set out in all sincerity to use their influence for good. But in the end, having that much power was just too dangerous. As the prophet Jeremiah pointed out, priests who are at the top of the heap have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo; God, on the other hand, is indifferent to the status quo. Having a large building and great influence is not the same thing as having a living faith. Nobody listened to Jeremiah, of course, which was sad. About twenty years after Josiah, the Babylonian armies of King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. They tore down the city walls, burned everything that would burn, and dismantled the temple stone by stone. As for the priests, the ones who survived were chained up and dragged into exile in Babylon. That comfortable church was no more.

That leads us today to a very different relationship with society because the old society was gone. Some of the Jewish exiles gave up on their faith. Some festered with hatred and dreamed of revenge. But some of them continued seeking the God of their people, even in captivity. These exiles had no temple, which meant that they couldn't worship as they used to. They used to worship by bringing animal sacrifices for the priests to offer on the altar, but now they no longer had animals to offer, or an altar, so they no longer needed priests. All they had left was their desire to seek the Lord. So they began meeting in homes – every week, on the Sabbath. They began showing their devotion to God not by bringing sacrifices but by studying and keeping the law of Moses, which meant that instead of priests, they needed teachers – scribes. And in this way the faithful Jews in exile invented the synagogue.

Our scripture reading today comes from that faithful, creative community. After a half century of reinventing their faith in exile, their society suddenly changed. Cyrus the Persian defeated Babylon and set free all Babylon's captive peoples. The Jewish exiles could return to their homeland, restore Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, start over. But here's the question: now that you've had a generation of worshiping God differently, do you even build a temple again? And if so, will it be the same? A prophet who preached during the exile said, no – it was time to do Temple differently, too. We read that prophet's words in the latter half of the Book of Isaiah – this reading from chapter 56, vv 3-8:

Isaiah 56:3-8. *Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,*

*'The Lord will surely separate me from his people';  
and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'*

*For thus says the Lord:*

*To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,*

*I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;*

*I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.*

*And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,*

*all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,  
and hold fast my covenant—*

*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;*

*for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.*

*Thus says the Lord God,*

*who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather others to them  
besides those already gathered.*

To understand how radical this prophecy is, you need to know some of the Jewish laws. The Book of Leviticus explicitly says that no foreigner will be permitted in God's sanctuary. Nor is there to be anyone who has any physical defect – eunuchs are singled out in particular. The holy place must be kept pure by eliminating every blemish, every imperfection, and every foreigner.

But at the end of the Babylonian Exile things felt different. The people of Judah had just spent fifty years in which *they* had been the foreigners. *They* had been the ones despised as unclean – and yet God had been with them. The Jews had created for themselves a new religious identity – no longer based on geography or genealogy, but rather on keeping the law of God, observing the sabbath, honoring God's covenant. And now the prophet of that people is asking a new question: What about a foreigner who keeps the sabbath? What about a eunuch who honors God's covenant and keeps God's laws? What if the old exclusions no longer apply? What if we build a new temple and invite eunuchs to worship alongside us? What if we bring faithful foreigners in as priests and ministers? What if God's house is not just for us Jews, but is a house of prayer for all nations? The prophet concludes with this revolutionary word: *Thus says the Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered* (v. 8).

The stable, comfortable Judean world of King Josiah's reign had collapsed in unfathomable chaos, but chaos has always been fertile ground for God's creative power. Stripped of all the old trappings of their faith, the Jewish exiles had discovered a new way to follow God, based on individual obedience and community instead of on group ritual. Some of them, like the Prophet of the Exile, even imagined that that faith was for everyone, without all the old exclusions and barriers. And how do you think that went over?

Unfortunately, there is another way to respond to cultural chaos. Many, when faced with sudden and confusing change in their society, turn inward, and ultimately, that's what the returned exiles did. They rebuilt the temple, but just for themselves. When non-Jews came and offered to help them rebuild, their offer was refused. No foreigner was to touch God's holy temple. It was for Jews and Jews only. No one else was welcome. Like Jeremiah before him, the Prophet of the Exile saw his words faithfully recorded in scripture, then ignored.

We, too, live in a time of incredible social change. Oh, nothing like what the Jewish exiles lived through. Their whole world was taken from them; we just see changes in the a few specific areas. But these changes are dramatic. In the past generation, we've seen huge shifts in the roles of men and women, sweeping changes in the ethnic makeup and attitudes of our nation, new attitudes toward sex and marriage, new definitions of family. And all this change is happening incredibly fast, swept along by the internet and mobile technology, carried around the world by satellite in seconds. Our world can at least be disconcerting, if not downright scary.

And as people of faith living in an unsettled time, we must choose how we respond. We can respond in fear. We can denounce all these changes as evil and try to hold back the tide of change. We can turn to an imaginary past and pretend that in our grandparents' days things were good and noble and pure, and that we just need to go back to that time. We can set up boundaries around our faith communities, welcoming only those who are just like us, who believe like us, act like us, look like us. And then we can consign all those other people to hell. This is the path that is chosen by the Taliban and the so-called Islamic State. This the path chosen by Westboro Baptist Church. This is the path of fear and fundamentalism, which are really on and the same thing.

Or we can reimagine faith, as the exiles did, as the prophet of Isaiah 56 did. We can look past the trappings of faith – our liturgies, buildings, and denominational rules – and ask, "What *is* the heart of our faith? What are supposed to be *doing*? What are we supposed to *be*?" And then we can open our doors to all people, even people who had once been unwelcome.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and chaotic, but the Spirit of God brooded over the face of the waters. God has always done brilliant work with chaos. In that assurance is our blessing. However our world may change, however we see it falling apart, the Spirit is there. Go in hope today. God is doing a new thing. Amen