

A House of Prayer for All People

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

One of the big events of the summer was the World Cup. Although soccer is not as popular in the United States as it is in other countries, it is still gaining in popularity. And for the tourists that came to the United States, it was an eye-opening experience. Many were amazed at just how big our country is. Others were amazed at how big the food portions are, at places like Raising Canes or Waffle House. Others were amazed by the hospitality they received, whether in a big city or small town.

There were challenges. One of the most well-respected referees from Africa was denied entry due to visa issues. The Iranian team was forced to stay in Mexico and only fly into the United States on the day of their game, and then fly out immediately afterwards. And the Scottish visitors drank Boston dry. Yet overall, it turned out to be a great showcase of what makes the United States unique, and why people from all over the world want to come and find a better life here.

At the height of the kingdom of Israel, people didn't come from all over the world to watch soccer games. They came to see the wonders of Jerusalem. They came to see the wisdom of Solomon in action. The Queen of Sheba and others traveled to see all that was there. They came to see the temple. And they came to hear about the God the temple was dedicated to, the God who had led the people out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land.

When Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple, he prayed that it would be a house of prayer for all people.

“Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far

country for the sake of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm, when he comes and prays toward this house, hear from heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name” (2 Chronicles 6:32-33).

He prayed that God would listen to all who prayed to him there.

For the people of Israel that Isaiah was addressing in this morning's Old Testament lesson, they had a task. Throughout the Old Testament, God had given His people a mission; to share the message of the true God with those around them. When God called Abraham, God said that it was so that the whole world would be blessed through him. When God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt, the plagues were done to show the power of the true God. During a years long drought, God sent Elijah not to a widow in Israel, but one on Zaraphath outside of the borders of Israel. God used the prophet Elisha to heal Naaman, a Syrian general whose nation had threatened Israel. God sent Jonah not to anywhere in Israel, but to Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire, an empire which threatened to invade Israel.

The people of Israel didn't live up to the task, though. Sometimes they remained separate and isolated, refusing to interact with those different than they were. Sometimes, instead of following the true God, they were instead led

astray to follow the false idols of the surrounding peoples. Sometimes, they continued to worship God in the temple, but their everyday lives were no different than those who didn't claim to follow God. They cheated and stole, exploited and oppressed, robbed from the poor to give to the rich. Eventually, God realized they wouldn't shape up on their own without drastic measures, and they were sent into exile in Babylon. After seventy years, they were brought back to Israel to try again.

The prophet Isaiah is active for over 60 years, across the reigns of 4 kings. The first part of the book that bears his name covers that time period, warning of the dangers to come and for the people to turn back to God. The second part looks ahead to when they are in exile, taken away from the land they lived in, the temple destroyed. This chapter opens a third section, looking even further ahead to when the people return from exile.

God hadn't restored them from exile just for their sake. God hadn't just redeemed them for their own sake. God had redeemed them, God had freed them, God had restored them to be a light to the Gentiles. God had freed them to share the good news that the whole world, could be freed from the powers of darkness. God had brought them back to rebuild the temple so that it could be a house of prayer for all people.

They didn't live up to that task, though. When they returned from exile, they became insulated, isolated. They developed new rules and laws, to keep themselves from breaking the laws that had gotten them sent into exile in the first place. They rebuilt the temple, but added a court of the Gentiles, a place where others could see the temple but still not approach God.

And so, in the days of Jesus, the Pharisees were more concerned with keeping themselves pure than with sharing the source of that purity with others. More than that, they'd turned the temple, what was supposed to be a house of prayer for all people, into a marketplace and a carnival. When Jesus drives the moneychangers out of the temple, he quotes this passage from Isaiah. He worked to restore the temple to a house of prayer for all people.

Jesus knew that people were separated from God by more than nationality. They were separated from God by sin. Because of their sin, all people were unworthy of approaching God in prayer. God didn't want to just separate himself from the world, but to enter into the unclean, messy, dirty world that we live in. God did this when Jesus came into the world as a baby, when he grew up to be a man who was one of us. Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist to be numbered with sinners. That baptism marked the beginning of his ministry, not him becoming more God. It marks the point where Jesus left the messiness of his father's wood shop and began his ministry, to show that he was the rightful king of the world. He did that not by starting a rebellion and taking a throne by force, but by serving. He did it by doing the task that his Father had set for him. He did that by going to the cross. That's why his last words on the cross were "It is finished!" His mission was accomplished. The servant of God had taken the sin, the messiness, of the world onto himself to save the world. He then sent his disciples out to share that good news, to tell all people who they should pray to.

Fraternity and sorority members have moved in already, as well, and new students to ISU will move in over the next few days. Students come from all over Iowa and all over the US to study

at ISU. We have the opportunity to share the good news with them, as well, or strengthen their faith.

We get to see this prophecy fulfilled. We are a house of prayer for all people. People from all over the state, all over the country, all over the world come together to worship here, to learn about Jesus and what He did to save them. They learn to call upon the only God who is real. Isaiah's prophecy hasn't reached its total fulfillment yet, but we see it as God continues to call all people to worship the one true God together. This is a house of prayer for all people, and we're blessed to see it.

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