

"Come to the Mountain"
(Accepting those we would prefer to ignore)
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 15
20 August 2023
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Isaiah 56:1,6-8
Psalm 67
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
St. Matthew 15:10-20, 21-28

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Promise One: The nations who have seen the mercy God has shown to you.

The Babylonian Exile touched Judaism in a profound way, and left many treasures in our scriptures. The story of Daniel and Esther, perhaps the story of Job, and the sermon we know as Jonah. It influenced the thought of at least one of the Isaiahs, and contributed to Jewish thought in general. The turbulence that was engendered by the cultural and political situations of this period in Israel's history continued on to the time of Jesus, and indeed much later. It saw the development of the Synagogue, the beliefs about angels, and the resurrection of the dead, among other things.

In today's first reading, this Isaiah entertains a notion espoused by others as well, the idea of universalism that opened up Jewish faith and life to others, and saw them as beloved by God in addition to the "chosen people." Thus in the first reading we have an announcement from this third of the Isaiahs about God's invitation to the nations. Let me read it for you again:

Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. 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.

There are several phrases that ought to capture our attention: that God will bring all kinds of people to the holy mountain, that God's house should be called a house of prayer for all people, and I will gather others. These ideas of this Isaiah were not universally shared. We only have to look at the books of Nehemiah, and Ezra, to see their dismissal of foreign wives who had married into Jewish families. We know it in our own time with the difficulties that families place on couples who flout societal norms of racism, classism, ageism, antisemitism and sexism. Isaiah, however, holds to

his truth. The reason that I am dragging you through all of this is so that we can understand the second half of today's gospel, and what Jesus shows us as a path of acceptance. But there is more.

Promise Two: All who are called by God.

The Psalm for this morning also has a universalistic bent to it. The hints are various: *"Let your saving health (be known) among all nations. Let all the peoples praise you. May all the ends of the earth stand in awe of God."* Other psalmists had similar ideas as they moved beyond the national God idea (an idea that needs to be thoroughly examined in our own time and country) to an idea of God over all the nations, accepting all the people, inviting them to live and to come to God's holy mountain. But there is more.

Promise Three: The Jews and the Gentiles

In Romans, Paul challenges us about our ideas about God and the Jews. He is proud of his Jewish descent. He sees the covenant with the Jewish people as still valid and still guiding people. Our history in the church of antisemitic behaviors and pogroms needs to be confessed by us and left upon the trash heap of history. Paul states it quite unequivocally, *"God has not rejected God's people whom God foreknew."* There you have it. All of this leads us especially to the second half of the Gospel reading for today.

Promise Four: Those persistent in their requests.

The reading consists of two separate pericopes, one involving forbidden foods, and speech. That I shall save for another time. The second has to do with the Syro-Phoenician woman who seeks healing for her daughter, and who challenges Jesus' own words on her request. This is where the ideas of the third Isaiah come to bear the ministry of Jesus. It is one of several stories where Jesus stands outside of Israel or social norms and teaches us tolerance and healing. The woman is from either Tyre or Sidon, She could stand in for a Canaanite or for a Samaritan. She exists outside of the salvation considered for Jews. Yet she hails Jesus and makes a request for the healing of her daughter. The disciples reject her, and even Jesus chides her with the words, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* She persists in her request (in which she joins a number of women who were persistent in their approach to Jesus. She continues in her request for both help and mercy. To Jesus' remonstrance about not taking food for the children and giving it to the dogs. Her reply is simple – *"just the crumbs that fall from the master's table."*

This is the faith that the psalm and Isaiah both speak about, and it is the faith that Jesus recognizes in this woman. It is a lesson to us as well. Whom is it that we would rather ignore than to invite to this place? It is something to think about, for God has invited more than just us to the feast. Yes, who is it?

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