

**A Portrait of a Worshipping Community
General Assembly, 2015**

Sunday morning sermon by the Rev. Dr. Patricia Dutcher-Walls

Isaiah 56:1-8
Mark 11:15-18

It was a time of displacement and loss.

Everything that gave the people identity was swept away by disaster. So much of what they once counted on to reinforce their religious understanding as God's people was gone. The religious centre they had hoped would be revitalized, was just a shell of its former self. Many didn't come home again.

It was a time of political and economic upheaval.

More powerful nations on the international scene were demanding political and economic allegiance from smaller and weaker states. Economic systems that worked well for many years deteriorated. A very few guaranteed themselves power by going along with dominant international interests. The rest just struggled.

It was a time of confusion and uncertainty.

Some no longer found their identity rooted in the traditions of their ancestors. Others felt they were in charge of the identity markers of the community—the family lineages and worship practices. Still others tried to reinvigorate the old traditions to inspire their lives.

Not surprisingly, it was also a time of highly charged argumentation.

Everyone seemed to have a judgment on what had gone wrong. Many sincerely felt that their ideas were the only right way to fix things. The most powerful asserted that they were the only true guardians of the people's heritage. Some expressed new ideas and hoped others would listen.

These were the dismayingly difficult political and religious conditions of the time after the exile that our passage from Isaiah addressed. The exiles who had been returned to Judah by the Persian Empire were trying to create a new life for community. Other Jews had remained in Judah as peasant farmers during the decades when the exiles were gone. Together they had to figure out how to be God's people once again. To the poignant question, "How then shall we live?" many offered conflicting answers.

Isaiah, whose oracles are collected in chapters 56-66, stands in a long tradition of prophecy preserved in the book of Isaiah. Here, the prophet answers exactly that poignant question. He starts and continually returns to the practicalities by which the people of God could in fact live, if not as an independent kingdom like before, at least and perhaps more importantly, as people who carry their faith with them whatever the conditions of their life.

It is not enough, says Isaiah, just to claim to be God's people. Rather, the people actually need to do the actions and practices of their faith: keeping the Sabbath, maintaining justice, doing what is

right, refraining from evil, holding fast the covenant, loving the name of the Lord, serving their God. These admonitions recur like a refrain meant to drill into their consciousness and theology that who they are, depends on how they live God's word and God's reality.

God's word here not only gives encouragement for how to live, but also reminds the people of the core traditions of their faith. For a community discouraged by how much they had lost, these references to indisputable centre of their heritage are crucial renewals of their identity. These core traditions include remembrance of God's standards for justice and righteousness; and the renewal of the Sabbath with its focus on rest for the whole community. And crucially, these core traditions include the centrality of being a worshipping community centered in the temple, the place where the Lord's holy presence was found in their midst.

Isaiah's focus on the temple reflects the centrality of the rebuilt temple in the post-exilic period. Denied a dynasty by their Persian overlords, the temple was, in its way, the remaining visible reminder of their previous kingdom. A lot was at stake for the community in the personnel and practices in the temple; a lot of religious meanings were bound up in how they understood the worshipping community.

In our passage, Isaiah wades right into the middle of the ongoing debates. His particular focus is that two 'outsider' groups are to be welcomed into God's people that gathers to worship. Imagine the surprise of the community to hear that eunuchs were part of God's people – these imperfect ones who were unclean because they could not fit the priestly definition of a whole person. By law and long practice they were excluded from the temple. But Isaiah declares an amazing word: these who could father no children, would have a name better than sons and daughters. They are welcome "in God's house and within its walls." Imagine the surprise of the community to hear that foreigners were also to be welcomed as God's people – these outsiders who were beyond the boundary of the community. But Isaiah declares an amazing word: these foreigners too are welcome on the holy mountain and would be joyful in God's house of prayer.

And the basis on which these outsiders were welcome? In this prophetic word, they were recognized and welcomed when they, like everyone else in the community, kept the ways and practices enjoined by God – Sabbath, serving the Lord, holding fast the covenant. The outsiders become insiders through participating in the core traditions and practices that tied the community to each other and to God.

But Isaiah was not the only one in that time with a vision answering the question, "How then shall we live?" Among several voices, one probably belonged to the priestly class who had charge of the temple. This group probably was, or had close ties to, the authors of the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. They were sincerely convinced that God's people would flourish when the community lived according to strict holiness codes of worship, identity and practice.

These priestly leaders stressed the importance of purity in the community. Only people who could trace their lineage to the ancestors were fully members of the community. Only those who met all the criteria for holiness could participate in worship life. Only those who upheld

traditions rooted in the earlier Davidic kingdom could help build the new structures that might one day, they hoped, fulfill expectations that God's kingdom would be re-established.

And they had very different judgments about the issues that Isaiah raises. They could quote a law like Deuteronomy 23 that said that eunuchs could not enter the assembly of the Lord. They could quote many passages warning against foreigners, and understood that admitting foreigners to the sanctuary was an abomination, a prophetic word from the prophet Ezekiel just a few generations earlier. In a story from Ezra and Nehemiah, we hear that this leadership group was so concerned about the presence of foreigners within the community that they declared that those who had married women from neighbouring areas must divorce and send away their wives and children.

In these wider debates about how they should live and who was to be included in God's people, Isaiah ups the ante, as it were. His oracle expands its focus to envision an eschatological future. In the final verses, the passage imagines a time when God's house will be a house of prayer for all peoples, when God who gathers the outcasts of Israel will gather others besides. What the community experiences now in worship and prayer by including all who serve the Lord, all who keep the covenant and Sabbath, all who do justice and righteousness, in Isaiah's prophetic imagination becomes an image of the future God will bring into being.

Isaiah's word for his time and God's vision for the future is again expanded when Jesus uses this passage from Isaiah to bring a word to his time and place. And Jesus' use of Isaiah's prophetic word could not be more dramatic. In the story as remembered by Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus enters the temple at the beginning of the final week of his life, just after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and confronts the sellers of sacrificial animals and merchants who exchanged currencies for temple visitors. He drives them out of the temple where they had set up business and says, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

Like many rabbis of the time who deliberated about the teachings of the law and prophets and thereby re-enlivened the Scripture, Jesus here remembers and re-interprets the passage from Isaiah. He keeps Isaiah's message alive and also extends its meaning so that his own actions and message resonate with Isaiah's words.

The gospels remember this moment of Jesus' life, as he is about to go to the cross, with all its meanings of sacrificial death, confrontation with powers of empire, and promised fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. At that crucial moment, Jesus confronts those who have turned the centre of worship and identity of the Jewish people into a commercial enterprise. He stands at that moment, and invokes the memory and presence of a great prophet who likewise confronted the centre of religious power. He stands at that moment, and challenges the arrogance of institutions and people who do not put God first in their lives. In that action, Jesus brings down on himself the fatal wrath of the authorities, but holds the crowds spellbound.

And so, what shall we say about the Kingdom in reading these passages? Let me try to express this in two ways; one from the perspective of Scripture as a whole and the other more particular to these texts.

The passage from Isaiah is a prophetic word situated in the intense debates about how the post-exilic community could survive and remain God's people. But in Scripture, we not only hear Isaiah's call for inclusion of eunuchs and foreigners, but we also have passages that show the priests' call to exclude those very classes of people. Throughout the Old Testament as a whole, God's people did preserve central ideas about God as sovereign, creator, deliverer, judge, and source of revelation and wisdom. But they also preserved a wide variety of traditions in extended and ongoing debates and discussions about identity, worship, law, revelation, practice, ethics, and theology. Short of deciding to delete some of these voices, we have to recognize that somehow the ancient scriptural community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit included differing perspectives and truths and called them all Scripture.

This wide discussion and inclusion of an inspired, ongoing conversation in multiple voices about matters of faith extends into the New Testament. Witness the simple fact that the early church included four gospels, each with rich and distinctive theological perspectives on Jesus' life, death and resurrection. A near example is that the story of Jesus throwing out the money-changers is located by John's gospel early in Jesus' ministry, not in the last week of his life, and it becomes in John's particular theology one of the early signs by which Jesus reveals who he is as Son of God.

For the community of interpreters today in the church, it is not easy to negotiate among these varied meanings and theological insights of Scripture; it would be far easier to reduce everything to only one meaning or to delete problematic passages in order to hear only a single voice. But Scripture is witness to over a thousand years of God's people writing their faith; as Art Van Seters always used to say, the Bible is a whole library of books. Perhaps we are enriched to recognize that Scripture through the provenance of the Holy Spirit has included a wide variety of voices.

This quality of Scripture is so pronounced and so engaging, no matter how infuriating particular texts might be, that I wonder if it is in fact a metaphor for how we are to live with each other now, and how we are to conduct our intense and gracious engagement with God, the text and each other. This quality of Scripture is so pronounced and so engaging, that I wonder if it might be a way to imagine the Kingdom among us. To engage well to all the ways that God addresses us in the cadences of the living Word, and to listen graciously to each other as interpreters, is to imagine the fullness of God's ultimate invitation to us of a realm beyond our knowing and yet as close as welcoming our neighbour.

And what might we see of the Kingdom in the message of the Isaiah passage, steeped as it was in debates about inclusion of outsiders and transcending that with an eschatological vision of a worshiping community that becomes a house of prayer for all peoples? While Isaiah challenges his time to open its community to those traditionally excluded, he does not preach an "anything goes" vision of the community's boundaries. Rather, with clarity and insistence he centres the people in their ancient traditions and calls them to live their faith well, to keep covenant and Sabbath, do justice and righteousness, to love and serve the Lord.

And if we follow Jesus' link between his actions and Isaiah's word, what more can we say about the Kingdom of God? At the beginning of the final week of his life, Jesus shapes his message

about the Kingdom in the temple that day when he threw out the money-changers. If in this moment, as in the whole gospel, we hear the message that the Kingdom is at hand, then we are invited to imagine life centred in worship that opens wide as a place for all peoples, yet with a clear paradigm for the Kingdom's way. With clarity and dramatic insistence, Jesus draws a boundary not against those marginalized and vulnerable ones whom he always included, but against values that would commercialize access to God's holiness, and against those who would put themselves first and God on the margins.

And if we take that message as good news for us, then our imagining, seeking and living of the Kingdom of God follows that astonished catch of breath when we see that who we are depends on how we live as Jesus' disciples. To engage well all the ways that God addresses God's people in the cadences of the living Word, and to listen graciously to each other as interpreters, is to imagine the fullness of God's ultimate invitation to us of a realm beyond our knowing and yet as close as welcoming our neighbour.