**Year A – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Isaia**h **56:1,6-8**

**September 3, 2017**

We Are God’s Gathered People

1. Accomplished by his righteousness (Vv1,8)
2. Reflected by our living (Vv6,7)

Introduction

So, how did your morning go? Perhaps you got up, rubbed the sleep from your eyes, showered, put on your Sunday best, grabbed a bite to eat, and headed out for church today. It was just another Sunday, perhaps you thought. Just another routine day. Sometimes I’m tempted to think the same way.

In today’s lesson we see that we have so much more than just another part of our routine happening here. We are God’s gathered people. He has accomplished our salvation by his righteousness, and that righteousness is reflected by our living.

Setting the Scene

Today’s text for our meditation is from the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah prophesies to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah about 700 BC, or 700 years before the birth of Christ. In the book of Isaiah we receive some of the most vivid prophecies about the coming Messiah that are found in the entire Old Testament. We hear in Isaiah chapter 7 that the Messiah would be a baby boy born of a virgin. In Isaiah 9 we hear that he would be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, and he would rule over the entire world for the good of his people. In Isaiah 53, Isaiah prophesies that the coming Messiah would be pierced for our transgressions, that he would be silent as he was wrongfully condemned to die, that he would suffer immensely. In fact, the prophecy of Isaiah so vividly describes the Messiah who would come that we often refer to Isaiah as being the “fifth gospel”—behind Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!

We see the hand of God in this prophecy. It wasn’t Isaiah the man who predicted these things by himself—it was God speaking through Isaiah that predicted these things. Also, only God could fulfill prophecies written about him 700 years earlier! And so, we know that Jesus is God.

In today’s prophecy from Isaiah, God speaking through his prophet vividly predicts that the gospel will go out to ALL people—not just the Israelites And he would gather people for his future church from many nations—including us.

Part 1: Accomplished by his righteousness

We begin the prophecy of Isaiah in verse 1, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.’” Now this is a bit of a contrast from the rest of Isaiah. Much of the rest of the book consists of messianic prophecy as well as a strong call to repentance for the Israelites. Here we see a more gentle call to repentance, not directed at the Israelites, but at foreigners. The sin of the foreigners wasn’t so much open rebellion, as it was with the Israelites; rather their sin was more ignorance and indifference toward the true God.

And so, God tells them to maintain justice and do what is right. The Hebrew words that are translated here as “justice” and “right” are *mishpat* and *tzedakah*. Those two words in the Old Testament summarize the goal of God’s commandments. God demands perfect behavior from his people! But throughout the Old Testament, we see God’s people—both Israelite and non-Israelite—giving him less than perfect behavior. In fact, they give him both indifference and open rebellion. Even though all the peoples on earth descended from Noah, a God-fearing man, through the generations they strayed. They listened to their sinful natures rather than remaining rooted in the promises of God.

Which is it for you? Have you exercised Israelite-style open rebellion against God, or have you been more indifferent, like the heathen nations were? Perhaps you have grown up with the incredible blessing of devout Christian parents. The vast majority of the world doesn’t have that blessing. You received a full-time Christian education at Gethsemane or another school that faithfully taught the pure Word of God. You learned it in Sunday School because your faithful Christian parents insisted you be there, as well as church, as well as having family devotions and prayer regularly. But then when you got to your teens, twenties, and thirties, you started to think you knew better than your faithful Christian parents. You engaged in all kinds of sin, rebellion, and thought to yourself, I’m certainly not going to go back to the strict Christian way I was raised! If that describes you, your rebellion is very similar to the Israelites. They too had the gospel of God’s grace with them all the time, but thought they knew better, thought they wanted to be like the rest of the world, engaging in wickedness, rebellion, and sin. And God sent prophets to call them to repentance, like he is calling you to repentance right now.

Or, have you been more indifferent like the heathen nations all around the Israelites? You haven’t had the saving gospel in front of you quite as much as lifelong Christians have. You’ve heard some things here and there. You’ve heard of Christian churches that stick to the truth, and others that seem to change their teachings every week. You’ve seen politicians and celebrities use church membership for political or personal gain, and you aren’t sure what to think of all that. You’ve heard propaganda from the media and social media that Christians are just a bunch of hateful hypocrites, but then your next-door neighbor, a devout Christian, tells you he prays for you and your family every day. And so you wonder what to think of it all.

Which one are you? No matter your background, here is what the God of the universe says to you, “Do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will be revealed.” How was that salvation close at hand? Well, 700 years might seem like a very long time to us, but compared to eternity, it’s an extremely short time. And 700 years after these words were proclaimed, Jesus Christ walked the earth. And he wasn’t just a man; the Bible tells us he was also God. He was perfectly holy and righteous. He never once sinned, not through rebellion nor through indifference. He obeyed all of God’s laws perfectly, even when he was starving in the desert for 40 days. He could have easily been indifferent to the plight of sinful humans, choosing to give up on his mission on earth and enjoy his comfortable heavenly life for eternity.

But no. He gave us perfect love. Giving himself up for us. Suffering and dying for us. Washing away all our sins. Winning eternity for us. It was his righteousness that accomplished our salvation.

And how, he has gathered you into his family. By hearing the good news of Jesus, your heart is changed by the power of God. By being baptized, your sins are washed away, and you are given new life in Jesus. And no longer do you live for yourself. No, when we realize what our Savior Jesus has done for us, we live for him.

Part 2: Reflected by our living (Vv6,7)

The text continues in verses 6 and 7, “And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house a prayer for all nations.”

No matter your background or your nationality, Jesus is your Savior. And today the saving message of Jesus as your Savior comes to you. You have come to the Lord’s house of prayer today, and you are being blessed by the things that are happening here. By hearing the Word of God, your faith is being strengthened. By the confession and absolution as we began the service, you were reminded, that despite your sinfulness throughout this week and beyond, you are still forgiven and at peace with God. By praying to him and praising him, you have the opportunity to speak back to God! And he hears your prayers and praises with joy, and commands you to continue them.

The believer responds to all this blessing, as Isaiah says, by bringing offerings to the Lord’s altar, which will do in a few minutes. And He accepts them! The believer binds himself to the Lord, loves the name of the Lord, and worships him regularly. That is what you do when, by God’s grace, you turn from sin and live a God pleasing life. That is what you do by coming to the Lord’s house for worship. We are God’s gathered people. We are his because of his perfect righteousness in our place, and we reflect Him in our living.

Conclusion

You know friends, sometimes it’s easy for us American Christians to grow discouraged with the decline of Christianity in our culture and in Europe. For centuries, the US and Europe had been bastions of Christianity, with their churches and schools growing and busting at the seams! But in the last twenty years or so, we have seen a steady decline in our culture.

It’s sad, but it’s not uncommon. God blesses a people with the gospel for many years, perhaps even many hundreds of years. Eventually a culture grows tired of the saving gospel and sadly wants to move on to other things and sinful lifestyles. Here in our culture it seems that the false gods growing all around us are politics, human reason, money, spiritual laziness, and a host of others.

But, take heart. There are still people being gathered into God’s kingdom here in our midst and around the world. The gospel is still working on the hearts of sinners here in the United States. It’s also booming elsewhere. Fifteen years ago, it was estimated that there were about 10 million Christians in China. Now, it’s estimated that there are over 100 million! Despite the threats of communism, the Christian church in China booms. The same results are being seen in places like Africa and India. Even in Pakistan, where one can be put to death for having any faith other than Islam, the Christian church is growing. At our WELS convention this year, we recognized fellowship with more sister synods—in East Asia, Hong Kong, and Ethiopia. There are now over 30 confessional Lutheran church bodies worldwide with whom we are in fellowship. The Holy Spirit is using our little synod and many other ones that faithfully teach and preach the pure Word of God to bring many, many people worldwide into God’s kingdom.

His prophecy through Isaiah is still coming true. All nations, all different kinds of Gentile foreigners, are binding themselves to the Lord. And they, and we, will one day be at God’s Holy Mountain in heaven. Revelation says there will be peoples from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne of God and in front of the Lamb, wearing white robes, waving palm branches, singing, “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!”

And we get a preview of that every Sunday in our worship services. Enjoy gathering with God’s saints. He has gathered us by his righteousness. Live for him, now and forever. Amen.