

“For All the Nations”

Reading: *Isaiah 56:1-8; Revelation 22:1-5, 17*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

We only have a few more weeks together before Pastor Carey, Junia, Calvin, and I pack up and head down the road. We moved here just before Christmas in 2006 with almost everything we owned fitting in a seventeen-foot U-Haul, and we moved from a tiny two-room student apartment in seminary to a parsonage that was, at the time, big enough that we would lose track of one another in it. I've preached a lot in those ten years, and some of it was even pretty good. But now we've come to the time of trying to think of what sorts of things we want to take with us – because a seventeen-foot U-Haul isn't going to cut it on this move – and also think of what we want to leave you with. What do we want our parting words to be? We could say things we haven't said yet – but in ten years we've said a lot – or we could say things we *wanted* to say but shouldn't have. But instead we're going to say things we've already said in other ways and hope you have already heard: some of the most important things. If you were here last Sunday we started by leaving you with three benedictions from the Bible. Benedictions are the last words that try to put all of the words before them in perspective, and the best last words are always about God, His goodness, His power, and His faithfulness.

Pastor Carey had the idea of leaving you with this song by Matt Maher called “The Spirit and the Bride,” because it's a song that sings of a lot of what we want to say to you and to everyone else we meet. Sometimes songs are easier to get hold of than sermons or lessons. Maybe that's why so much of the Bible is written as poetry or song. Singing our words elevates them beyond just the mind grasping them and lets the soul hold onto them. And so in this song, Matt Maher sings of how all people, hurting souls and skeptics and Pharisees and forgotten and on and on, all people are invited by the Spirit and the Bride to come to God. The Bride of Christ, the church, lends her voice to the Spirit of Christ in that neverending call of invitation, and the call is especially to those who hurt. That's one of the messages I hope you've heard from me over the years, and it's one of the messages we want to leave you with.

That's the message Isaiah the prophet sings in our Scripture passage today: a song of invitation to those who would normally be excluded without a second thought. Isaiah has just been singing of God's promises to His exiled people: their story is one of their faithlessness in response to God's goodness, and as a result they have been scattered across the world, cut off from their promised land and from one another. Isaiah tells them that God will continue to be good to them, that their exile will not last forever, that there is hope because God is not yet done with them. And that's great news for the exiles, for the people who were a part of God's family but have disobeyed and are now being punished. What about all the others? What about all the people on the outside looking in?

God's goodness is overwhelming, and so there is also hope for them. God is not content to gather His scattered children. He will “gather still others to them;” His family isn't big enough. So Isaiah sings not only to the exiles, he also sings to the foreigners and the eunuchs: “Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.’ And let no eunuch complain, ‘I am only a dry tree.’” God's covenant with His people was a national covenant: the religion and the government and the economy and family life were all part of the same thing, at least ideally. If you were an Israelite, you were born into God's covenant. That's why Jesus' explanation

that you need to be “born again” was so shocking to His people, because the general assumption was that if you were born a Jew and you kept God’s commandments, you were good to go. But God’s plan is so much more inclusive and hopeful than that.

Foreigners are outside the nation, therefore they’re outside of God’s family. There were ways to convert to Judaism, but as a foreigner you started out at a disadvantage. The covenant wasn’t really for you. For the exiled Israelites, the question was whether you could get back into God’s good graces, but for a foreigner, the question was whether you could get in the first time at all. Eunuchs were men who were castrated so they could serve in high levels of government, and they were usually selected at a young enough age that they didn’t have any choice in the matter. According to the Torah, eunuchs were automatically excluded from full participation in worshipping God because they were not physically whole. So Isaiah is singing to people who are forced out to the margins by no fault of their own: they’re excluded because of where they were born or what someone else did to them. And there’s not much they can do about it, either, so they’re stuck without hope, if they realize that all true hope comes from the Lord.

But what does Isaiah tell them? To the foreigners who are by virtue of their place of birth excluded from fully entering God’s temple, Isaiah promises them that God will “bring them to my holy mountain,” and “their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar.” They’re invited to come and worship God fully and freely. God says that His house will be called a “house of prayer *for all nations*,” not just a place for the few who are lucky enough to be born to the right nation. And for the eunuchs who are in the same situation because of what’s been done to them, the promise is much the same: they’re welcome to have a place in God’s presence. But for them, who have no hope of marrying and having children and passing on their name, God promises that they will have a legacy in His very house. Family was extremely important in that culture, but eunuchs were totally denied having a family of their own. God says that He will bring them into His family with no hesitation, no shame, no apologies.

That’s the same picture we see painted for us by John in Revelation 22. The indiscriminate invitation to come has gone out, and all who have listened to that call are gathered in God’s great city of the redeemed, and the curse has been removed, and healing and light and life are simply there for the taking, and God Himself is available. God plants trees that are there for the healing “of the nations,” not just the select few. And almost at the very end, John says that the Spirit of Christ and the Bride of Christ, God and His church, join their voices to invite people to come. “And let the one who hears say, ‘come,’” John says: once you receive the invitation you can’t help but pass it on. “Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.” There’s no limit or exclusion. If you’re thirsty – and everyone gets thirsty – come.

This is one of the messages I hope you’ve heard from me many times over the last ten years, because it’s what we’re here for. Our message as the Bride of Christ is just that: “Come.” And there are an awful lot of people right outside our doors who need to hear it. We’re not in the same situation Isaiah was in, where eunuchs and foreigners were the stock examples of people on the outside of God’s grace looking in, but we’re surrounded by people who are in need of redemption. They need to hear someone giving them that invitation to come. Take a quick scan over the headlines in the crime section of the Pocono Record during the last couple of weeks. A woman was killed in a car crash. A man robbed a Dollar General store. Arson, bank robberies, accidental death, child

pornography, assaulting a rival gang member in prison, murder. A child died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. And that's just the stuff that makes it onto the police scanners and into the news, and that's just in our area in recent days. As I'm sure you know, Monroe County has some of the highest rental rates in the state, but it's also an area of high unemployment, a full percentage point higher than the state average and nearly a percent and a half higher than the national average. The average Monroe County resident makes \$12,000 less in a year than the average Pennsylvanian. A 2010 survey of religious groups found about 73,000 people claiming to be some sort of Christian in Monroe County, but it also found 93,684 who claimed no religion. People are hurting, and they need a message of hope. Where else are they going to get it?

It's too easy to pretend that we're surrounded by good people, to think that while there may be some folks in need of help or healing or a little bit of cleaning up, there aren't really any eunuchs or foreigners in *our* neighborhood. It's too easy to think that, well, we post our service times on the sign right outside, so shouldn't everyone just know they're welcome? Why would they feel excluded from God's grace?

There are many models of ministry out there to describe how a church should operate, but I think we can contrast two for our purposes today. There's a model that assumes your culture is basically Christian and stable and virtuous and healthy. It's the model that many churches operated under for a long time in much of American and European history. The church is in a privileged position because it's assumed that basically everyone is Christian. And in that sort of context the role of the church is mostly shepherding: keeping the sheep fed and happy and clean, occasionally tapping one back into the flock when it starts to stray, and when we encounter the occasional wild sheep out there we might ignore it and hope it isn't a bad influence on the good sheep. The word of God is used to enlighten and inform and educate and entertain the flock, with some sermons thrown in about how bad the wild sheep are, but we don't bother to actually talk to *them*. The word isn't there to confront or transform, because the sheep are quite comfortable where they are, thank you very much.

But that's not the world the church actually lives in, and it probably never has been. Our culture is not primarily Christian, and the church cannot assume a position of privilege. We're not in a nation of neatly manicured, polite sheep. We're surrounded by people who are hurting, lost, and often hostile. And let's be honest: *we're* not the neatly manicured sheep we think we are, either. We give in to temptation. We get lazy. We fail to do the good we know we're called to do, and then we come up with excuses. The sheep pen is not meant to make the sheep fat, it's meant to make them fit and ready. And the word of God is not meant to entertain or to show you how much better you are at the religion game than someone else, it's meant to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable with the presence of God.

So in that sort of context we're called to a different engagement with the world around us. We recognize sin for what it is, we recognize pain for what it is, we recognize injustice for what it is, and we boldly respond with compassion. We don't just seek out the wayward sheep, the exiles, those who are like us and used to be part of the fold but have wandered away. We also search the far hills for the wild sheep, the eunuchs and foreigners, those who have been so far from God that it never occurred to them that they might have a place in His family. And we share with them the invitation to come. Your name has meaning in God's temple. Your offerings will be accepted by the God you

thought was against you. God's house is not restricted to the good enough saints, it's a house of joyful prayer for all nations. The water is there for everyone who is thirsty.

The church exists for the purpose of making space for more, and then going out to give the invitation to come and fill that space. We have a voice so that we, the Bride, can join with the Spirit in saying, "Come!" We're called out of our comfort not because God likes it when we aren't happy or because Christianity enjoys our misery, but because we have learned that comfort doesn't help us grow, and so we are sacrificial in our love and challenging in our self-examination. We open our eyes to the hurting people around us, and we invite them to come.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)