

September 5, 2021
Lectionary 23, Year B
The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 35:4-7a
Mark 7:24-37
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Enough for All?

As you might remember, from so many months ago, back before the pandemic, we had two weekly Bible Studies here at Emmanuel. Well, actually, it was the same Bible Study, it was just offered at two different times, one in the morning and one in the evening. Our Bible Study groups were in the middle of an exploration of Second Isaiah when the pandemic started.

Once the pandemic began and things were in such disarray in our church, in our personal lives, in our whole world, I decided that I wasn't going to try to continue our Bible study during that time of upheaval. I figured that we could take a break from active Bible Study for the weeks that we were locked down and find other ways to support each other and encounter God together while the pandemic lasted. In fact, our Wednesday Night Prayer Group now takes place at the time when one of our Bible Studies used to meet.

Of course, I was not expecting a pandemic that stretched into years. I was not expecting us not to be "back to normal" a year and a half later. Perhaps if I'd known that we were hunkering down for the long haul, I might have made some different decisions at the very beginning of this pandemic, in the stillness and the shock of lockdown, of the crisis that now feels more like it is just our new way of life. I might have figured out how to continue

with our weekly Bible Study, in the midst of the trauma of our lives coming to a screeching halt last March.

Now, as we offering prayers and blessings for a new school year, of course, my mind and heart turn again to how we can resume our weekly Bible Studies as a community of faith. I say my mind and my heart, because that's how I feel about Bible Study. That it is where my heart is. I love delving into the mystery and the promise of the Bible. I love thinking about the people who lived and wrote those stories. I love picturing the world that they lived in, the struggles they faced, the emotions they felt, the ways in which they are not so different from us.

Like I said, it's been a long time since I've taught a Bible Study, which means that this sermon, might feel a little bit like a Bible Study. Please accept my apologies in advance, but what we have here is a perfect storm. With the beginning of a new school year, I have Bible Study on the brain, and today's first reading comes from a part of the Bible, which is known to many as "Second Isaiah", and which was the part of the Bible that I was in the midst of studying and teaching when the lockdown brought our Bible Studies to a halt last March. So, maybe it's natural that I feel a need to preach a "teachy" sermon.

Now, please, don't grab your Bibles and start looking for Second Isaiah. You won't find it. It doesn't exist as a separate book in the Bible. Some books in the Bible are listed that way. 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, 1st and 2nd Thessalonians, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John. So, since I said that today's Old Testament reading comes from Second Isaiah, it would be reasonable to think that if you opened your Bibles, you would find it there, in the table of contents. Second Isaiah, perhaps right after First Isaiah.

But that's not how this works. Second Isaiah isn't a separate book. It's actually a part of the book of the Bible that we know only as Isaiah. And for much of Christian history people just assumed that it was written by one man, a man named Isaiah. But even as early as the 12th century, there were some who were wondering if it was possible, that the book of Isaiah had been written in more than one time period and by more than one person. In the last 250 years, more and more people have asked that question and have seen in the book of Isaiah the distinct hand and writings of not just two prophets, but possibly even three prophets.

Isaiah chapters 1-39 are believed to be the work of a prophet known as Isaiah of Jerusalem, who wrote his oracles of judgement and promise to the people of the kingdom of Judah during the 700s BC, at the time of the Assyrian invasion.

Isaiah chapters 40-55 are what is known as Second Isaiah, who is also sometimes called Isaiah of Babylon. These chapters were written about 200 years after Isaiah 1-39, and address the Jewish people who were in exile in Babylon between 586-539 B.C. It is also believed, based on similarities of theme and language that Isaiah chapters 34 and 35 were originally part of Second Isaiah's work, but were misplaced during the process when these prophetic oracles were edited into one book, and now appear in the midst of First Isaiah's work.

Just to blow your mind, even though it's not really germane to this sermon, I'll also tell you that the remaining 10 chapters of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66 are believed to be the work of a third prophet, creatively named Third Isaiah and are addressed to the exiles, have they have returned to their destroyed

homeland of Judah and face the challenges of rebuilding the nation that the Babylonians destroyed.

Second Isaiah, the person responsible for writing Isaiah 40-55 and Isaiah 34-35 is my favorite prophet in the Bible and wrote some of my favorite words in the Bible.

Our Old Testament reading for today is from Isaiah 35, that misplaced part of Second Isaiah's writings.

The overarching theme of Second Isaiah is that God is coming to get the exiles in Babylon. God is going to save them. God is going to rescue them from their captivity. God is going to create a way for them to get home. A repeated image in Second Isaiah is one of a highway in the desert, where all obstacles between God and God's people, between the people and their homeland will be removed. Isaiah chapter 40 says this,

In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ‘

Every valley shall be lifted up,

and every mountain and hill be made low;

the uneven ground shall become level,

and the rough places a plain (Isaiah 40:3b-4)

The story of this highway is that, not only will obstacles be removed from the people's way, but also, that they will have what they need, they will be provided for on their journey. There will be shade trees in the desert, they will find water when they need it, God will make it possible for them to return

to their home in safety. We see that imagery in our reading from Isaiah 35 for today:

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water (Isaiah 35:6b-7a).

Another theme of Second Isaiah is that God is going to do something extraordinary, something dramatic in order to rescue the exiles. We hear that promise in today's reading from Isaiah 35:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you (Isaiah 35:4).

God's salvation is coming to the people in some kind of extraordinary way. We hear this in Isaiah 41:

Who has roused a victor from the east,
summoned him to his service?
He delivers up nations to him,
and tramples kings under foot;

he makes them like dust with his sword,
like driven stubble with his bow.
He pursues them and passes on safely,
scarcely touching the path with his feet (Isaiah 41:2-3).

A hero is coming, God's chosen, a victor from the east, and in Isaiah 45, we learn his name:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped
to subdue nations before him
and strip kings of their robes,
to open doors before him—
and the gates shall not be closed:
I will go before you
and level the mountains,
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
and cut through the bars of iron,
I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
For the sake of my servant Jacob,
and Israel my chosen,
I call you by your name,
I surname you, though you do not know me (Isaiah 45:1-4).

This naming of Cyrus the Great of Persia, is one of the most extraordinary moves in the whole Bible, because it is a gentile, who is to be the tool of God's blessing, God's vindication, God's salvation. It is a gentile who is called God's anointed, which means God's messiah. It is a gentile, a foreigner, a non-Jew, who is God's chosen one, who does God's work and brings God's help to God's people. It is through the gentile king, Cyrus, that the promise we see in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 35 is fulfilled,

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you (Isaiah 35:4).

Throughout the Bible, you can see a debate raging. A debate about if and how the Jews should interact with the gentile populations that surrounded them.

There are some parts of the Old Testament that say that there should be no interaction. That Jews should completely ignore and spurn their gentile neighbors.

There are other parts of the Old Testament that make it clear that not only is it not possible, it is not necessary for the Jews to have no interactions with their gentiles who surrounded them, and there are stories about how some gentiles were a played a positive role throughout Jewish history.

This debate continued in the early church, when the first Christians struggled with whether or not the salvation found in Jesus was only for the Jews or if gentiles too, could experience salvation, from the Jewish Messiah.

Most commentators think that today's Old Testament reading was paired with today's gospel reading because of the part that talks about the healing that will come with God's return and rescue of God's people. Isaiah 35 says:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (Isaiah 35:5-6).

This promise and hope seem to be fulfilled in Jesus' healing of the deaf and mute man that we find in today's gospel reading.

But today's Old Testament reading being in the context of the Second Isaiah story of God's salvation for the people of Israel coming through the gentile, Cyrus, seems also to fit with the very uncomfortable interaction that Jesus has with the gentile woman who comes to Jesus to ask for healing for her daughter.

The interaction is uncomfortable, because Jesus insults the woman who comes to ask for healing for her daughter. He insults her because she is a Gentile, not a Jew.

It seems in that moment, in that interaction, that Jesus is on the side of those people who we find throughout the Bible and who certainly made up

much of the Jewish population of Jesus' time, who believed that there should be no interaction between Jews and Gentiles.

For those who read Mark's gospel 65 or 70 years after Jesus' birth, they might have thought that Jesus' response to the woman was the definitive word on whether or not gentiles could be included in the church. The answer was no. Jesus' ministry, Jesus' salvation, was for the Jews alone, not for the dogs, the gentiles, who stood outside looking in at the people of the covenant.

But Jesus spoke those words in Tyre, a place where he had willingly traveled and a place that was a gentile region, named for a gentile city, a place where Jews did not go, where he could not expect to find Jews who needed his help, but instead gentiles who were in need of healing, of salvation.

When the Syrophenician woman came to him pleading for the life, for the sanity, for the healing of her daughter, Jesus gave the answer he would have been expected to give, based on so much of the teaching of his scriptures, that God's gifts were for the Jews alone.

But the woman, who would not accept no for an answer, perhaps reminded Jesus, and any who looked to him for a definitive answer for how the Jews and later the church should interact with Gentiles, that the word of rejection, the sharp divide between Jews and Gentiles, was not the only word on the subject in the scriptures. There were stories too, about mutual help, about compassion and kinship between Jews and gentiles, and even the story found in Second Isaiah, about God's chosen messiah, being Cyrus, the gentile, God's anointed, through whom God brought salvation to God's people. The

woman pointed out that there was enough for everyone, even the dogs, reminding Jesus that at an abundant table, no one went unfed.

And Jesus quickly changed his tune granting the woman the healing that she sought for her daughter.

Today's readings represent some of my favorite stories in the Bible, the stories from Second Isaiah, and one of my least favorite stories in the Bible, the story of Jesus' interaction with this gentile woman. I do not like how Jesus treats this woman, how he speaks to her and seems willing to ignore her need and her and her daughter's suffering.

But a little part of me wonders if Jesus might have set this interaction up all along. After all, he willingly went into a gentile area and he had to know, had to expect that someone would approach him for help. He had to know that the issue would be raised.

Maybe he wanted someone, perhaps one of his companions, one of the disciples, who knew the scriptures, all of the scriptures, to challenge the conventional wisdom that he articulated when he rejected the woman's plea for help. Maybe he expected one of them to state that in the story of their faith, there were examples of times in scripture when Jews and gentiles had helped each other, times when God's blessing came through Jews to gentiles and from gentiles to Jews.

But the word that freed Jesus' ministry to be a reflection of the complexity and diversity found in the Old Testament narrative, perhaps appropriately, came, not from one of Jesus' Jewish companions, but from the gentile woman herself, who was willing to bear any insult and to take any position, to play any role in the household of God for the sake of her daughter.

The final word on the question of whether or not Jesus' ministry and God's love could reach beyond racial and ethnic distinctions and limitations turned out not to be "no", but "yes".

It was a word for Jesus' ministry and for his disciples.

It was a word for the church, as they told and read this story, in the years after Jesus' resurrection and welcomed gentiles into their community and table fellowship.

And it is a word for us, as we try to live out our declaration that "All are welcome." It is a word that calls us to grapple with the question, "What does it look like to sit at a table where there is enough for all?" Amen.