

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

A House of Prayer

Isaiah 56.7

August 20, 2023

I'll invite us this morning to reflect on scripture, particularly the reading from Isaiah. As we turn our minds and our hearts toward the prophet, also as you see as an insert in your worship guide, today is the beginning of Chart season. I'm not going to take the sermon today to talk about the Chart, but I want to mention it because it's right in front of each of us today. The Chart—this is the main way our participation in the ministries of the church comes together. This time of year, we join one another as a community—to take a role in the church's life in some way or another by putting our names down next to the role we'll take. It's a simple, and beautiful exercise in high trust in one another—to do the work—and to trust that the work I do is meaningful and needed. I assure you it is.

The way the chart goes from blank spaces to a roster of ministry is a practical answer to the question: What kind of church are we going to be this year? It's how we incarnate an answer to that question. Not by a pithy mission statement, nor by an administrative imposition, but by the way each of us, all of us together, link hands as a community.

Yet, the question still remains, What is the church is that is manifested in all these ways? What's at the heart of that is in all these lines and that everything else serves. I was asked that sort of question many times in many ways yesterday at the Baylor Church Fair where I met dozens and dozens of college students--freshmen and some transfer students wanting to know, what kind of church is this? And the other, from those from California, Washington, and Illinois and Canada: Is Texas always this awful? No, but it's going to be a while is the answer to the second question.

There may be no better answer to the first question than the one given in Isaiah 56, where God says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Isn't that a beautiful vision? A hopeful vision. It's one of the radical and hopeful words in scripture that make plain God's vision for the place and community gathered in his name. It's hopeful because whatever tempests are churning in the world or in any individual life, there's a place of prayer in the world that will endure. And there's a place waiting for you there. It's radical because there's a place for everyone else there, too.

Before it is anything else, and it is a lot of things to a lot of people, DaySpring is a house of prayer. It was intended that way from the beginning, a community of friends coming together who wanted a slow, human, and hospitable space to hear life-giving words, to hold silence, share meals together, take part in good conversation, listen for the living person of Christ in the scriptures, and sing. And in all these ways to be a people of shared work and prayer, whose ways of being church could invite others—many others—to share in this life. It was not going to

be a house of more busy-ness, a house of egocentric pastors, a house of callous money raising, or a house of perpetual guilt. DaySpring is a house of prayer, even before there was a physical house to house the household of faith.

This lovely house of prayer has sheltered us in worship for 20 years now, and it still looks pretty good, I'd say. Oh, the prayers that have been offered to God in this place--they soak the walls of the sanctuary and small chapel and the bark of the oaks. Prayers in the silence and darkness at the end of Good Friday and in the trumpets and alleluias of Easter morning. Prayers around candlelight at Evening Prayer in the chapel and special gatherings in the wake of tragedies, public and very, so very personal. Prayers dedicating our babies, burying our deceased, ordaining men and women to ministry, and blessing in marriage. And the prayers given birth in the silence in our worship together. I think of the prayers offered in your silence each Sunday.

I have experienced this place as a place of rich prayer in my own life, when I'm alone here at times during the week, and with you whether in silence or song on Sundays when the place is full. My heart has been lifted high; I've been brought nearly to tears. I've shared these moments with you. I know there are prayers far beyond anything I know and quite likely prayers you have prayed beyond what anyone else knows but you and God. Silence in worship has a way of disturbing the soil of our hearts. At first, it is a little disconcerting for people not used to silence in worship or anywhere else, but more and more over time, we come to hunger for it, a breath we can take, a quietness where the truths and the questions buried deep inside begin to stir because God is here, and sometimes we need to just get our words out of the way. I remember one busy young parent years ago said, the time of silence on Sunday morning in worship is the only moment of quiet I have all week. Amen.

Silence has an exterior and an interior dimension. The exterior dimension is the absence of sound, or at least what we would call noise, unwanted sound. The interior dimension is a stilling of the spirit, a soothing of the anxieties, a resting of the mind. Interior silence is the beginning of prayer. For this to be a house of prayer, it must always be a place where not only are prayers verbally spoken but where the spirit is given free reign amongst us, leading us to that inner silence where Christ meets us even when, or especially when we come to the point in life where we don't know how to pray anymore.

The word 'house' in scripture has a double meaning—it means the physical structure, and it means the people within, the household. So, for Isaiah, it meant the temple in Jerusalem and the people of God. God's house is a temple and the community of people constituted by a life of prayer. The second meaning of the word house is the community. DaySpring, then, is not just a physical structure where prayers are spoken but a household of prayer, or put another way, a community whose life is prayer. We borrow a phrase from the monastics: "Our work is our prayer and prayer is our work."

All about the church that is manifested as exterior work, is an expression of interior prayer. Worship care of babies, mowing the grass whenever it rains again, turning compost, and

teaching Sunday School. All work, all the prayer of a household of prayer. *My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples.*

As Chapter 56 in Isaiah opens, the world is about to change. Before the prophet stood a people who had suffered for so long in exile. They were scared, anxious, and feeling like the world was being torn apart. Human nature under threat is to pull in the ranks, circle the wagons, and protect yourself by surrounding yourself with people just like you. Maybe I can get away with that in my house, but I can't do that in God's house. Chapters 56-66, the last 10 chapters of the massive book of Isaiah, are written at just a critical moment in the making of a people and the remaking of their world. These people of Jerusalem have been in exile in Babylon where they had been for 70 years. They have hung their harps by the river there and wept, as they remembered home. The songs of home have been silenced for so long, but now, a new song is just beginning to be heard. The prophet sings it like a banner flying over the people in verse 1: "There is good news. You are going home, and God is going to be with you. The Word of God is near, and your deliverance is coming soon. So keep justice, practice righteousness, be renewed in the covenant of trust with your God who has not forgotten you."

But, and this is important, it's not going to be like it was before. Things have changed. Suffering changes a person and a community, and they've been changed so much it seemed like God had changed. In the old days, the way they had it set up at the old temple, the one that was destroyed, the one left behind when they were taken into exile, and the way that system was set up, the closer you approached God, the more credentials you had to have: race—Jew, gender—male, body—ritually pure and clean, vocation—priest, designation—high priest. If you were outside all of that, you were outside of all of that—and you were outside the house of God, on the very margins of the household of God. An elaborate and intricate system was set up to establish these concentric circles of access to God.

The exile experience has changed them. It changed everything. What they've learned and experienced is that God is no longer confined to the Holy of Holies, which at this moment is in ruins. But God lives. And the community of God is no longer restricted to just the people of Israel. It's like the house of God got a whole lot bigger. They're returning home as a humbler people, which makes them a more gracious people, which makes them a more welcoming people, which means they are able to hear the prophet speaking for God, who declares that the doors of the new temple they'll rebuild are going to be propped open. In post-exilic temple worship, anyone who joins him or herself to God by devoting themselves to God's way is going to be in the house and part of the household, even the foreigners, even the strange people, even your enemies are going to be right next to you if you come in these doors.

Let us hear the words of Isaiah again:

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, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds 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.

The Lord who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, 'I will gather others besides those already gathered.'

At this critical moment in history, Isaiah announces, it seems, a wideness of the mercy of God which would welcome all outcasts, all foreigners, all rejected people to his house. Only one response is asked from each person: that God be loved as he loved them, in faithfulness and obedience to the covenant. God is coming to be with his own. His "own" is a lot bigger than they thought. *Mi casa es su casa.*

One thing seems clear, to those who were going back home to Jerusalem, they will rebuild the temple, but it won't be like before. It will be holy, it will be high on the mountain. It will be devoted to the worship of God and the formation of the people of God in God's ways. It will be an inspiration and place of prayer. But it won't be like before. God's house going forward is going to have a lot more room inside, enough room for all the world, and doors that swing wide open. *La casa de Dios es su casa.*

Later, the gospel writers will portray at the death of Jesus the curtain in the temple being torn from top to bottom as a sign of the grace of God unleashed for all people, Jew and Gentile. Here in Isaiah, we see that vision already birthed at the moment of the return of the people from exile. It's a vision that Jesus will embody with the Canaanite woman who comes to him and tests the outer limits that Jesus' disciples assume he will maintain on his grace. And Jesus' own exchange with the woman seems to be written in one exchange, the whole history of Israel writ large. It's a vision given to Peter in the dream of a sheet coming down from heaven with unclean animals to eat. It's a vision at the heart of Paul's appeal to the Romans and Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians, and all the churches he founded by the gospel he preached. It's a vision carried on by people all around the world, whose doors and whose hearts are flung open and who come down the aisle, shoulder to shoulder, with others, those who are so very other, to come to the table of grace.

In Christ, the vision is fulfilled and given to us all. The doors of God's house are flung open to all who will come to worship, to serve, to love God and God's people. God's house, in every meaning of the word, is a house of prayer that welcomes each of you in the fullness of you, in the brokenness of you, in your faith and your struggle for faith, in your righteousness and your thirst for it, in your failure to thirst for it, in your prayer and in all the ways you just don't know how to pray. The Spirit prays with us in groans that are too deep for our words.

Brothers and sisters of the household of faith, let us always pray in the Spirit: Come, Lord, pray for us and in us and make our life and life together a place and a prayer of praise and compassion for all who cross the threshold of the wide-open doors of divine mercy. Amen.