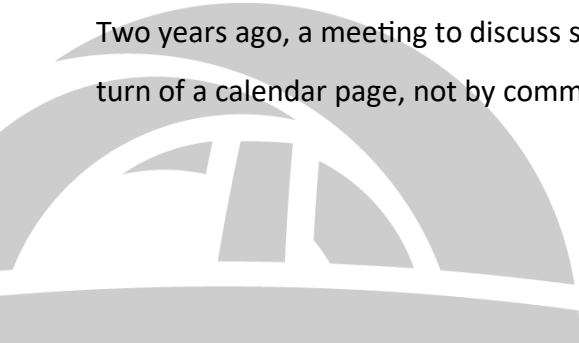


God's Guest List May be Different Than You Think

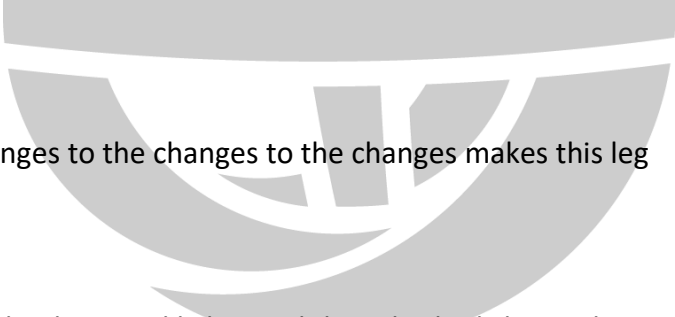
Isaiah 56:1-8

1 Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.
2 Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.
3 Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'
4 For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 5 I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.
6 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, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—
7 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.
8 Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

I was in a meeting with our COVID Team the other night. This team has met regularly throughout the last eighteen months to provide expert advise and careful discernment about what and how ministry should look like during the pandemic. We had a few things to check in about as we continue to regather as a congregation. We talked about when it's appropriate for the choir to sing again in worship, when the nursery should be opened to families again, and when it might be ok to serve coffee and meals on Sundays and Wednesdays again. In the course of each of these conversations we reviewed what we've learned over the last 18 months, who is affected by decisions, and how we ensure that those who are most vulnerable continue to feel they have as safe a place to regather as God's people as those less vulnerable.



Two years ago, a meeting to discuss such things would have seemed ridiculous. These events happened by the turn of a calendar page, not by committee. But the world has changed and so have the rules that we live by.



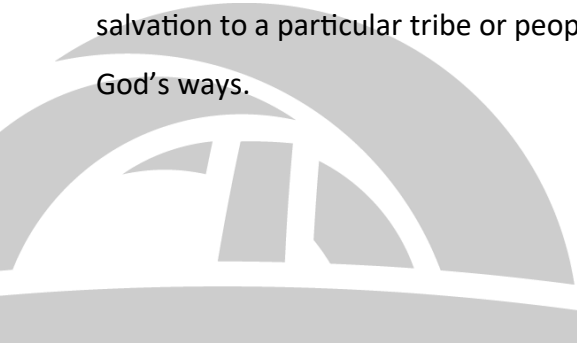
We're all renegotiating the rules we live by. And all the changes to the changes to the changes makes this leg of the journey through pandemic particularly challenging.

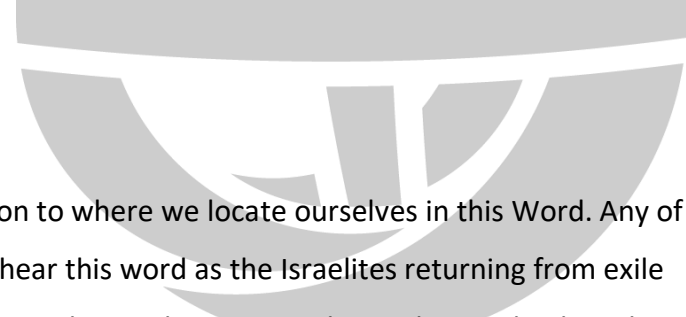
As the Israelites made their way back to Jerusalem after exile, they quickly learned the rules had changed. It was the same place, but different. It was home, but it wasn't. Seventy years had passed, so many of the people were returning home for the first time. As they reestablished their community as God's people, they too had to renegotiate the rules. And there wasn't always agreement about how to move forward. Some felt that it was important to isolate from other cultures they were living among. They wanted to rebuild the community from the inside. This movement was led by the Zadokites, a branch of priests who felt it was important to stick to the Law of Moses. Deuteronomy 23:1 says, "No male whose genitals are crushed or disfigured shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." And two verses later the Law states, "No Ammonite or Moabite (read "foreigner") shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." Tradition and history were on their side. So, it was understandable that a different way of rebuilding community would create some controversy.

But out the ashes of exile, God announced a new way. "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance will be revealed." Who gets included in God's salvation after exile? What does justice look like in this place that doesn't quite feel like home?

Just listen to what God says through the prophet. "To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths...and hold fast to my covenant...I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And to the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord – these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer...Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered."

Salvation was coming. God's deliverance from exile wasn't just for those who were coming home from the exile in Babylon, but for anyone seeking a homecoming from alienation or fear. It was coming for anyone who was seeking a home with God. Friends, this is the good news of God's salvation for us. God does not limit salvation to a particular tribe or people, but opens wide the doors of the household of God to all who seek God's ways.

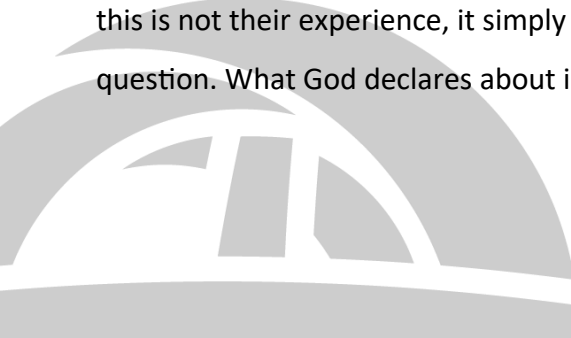


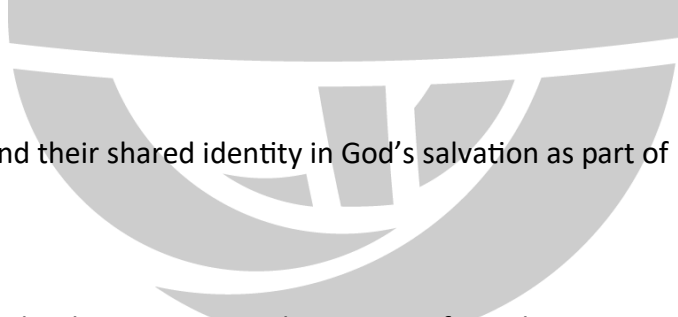


As we hear passages like this, it's important to pay attention to where we locate ourselves in this Word. Any of us who have been part of the church our whole lives may hear this word as the Israelites returning from exile did, as insiders. But in this case, the insiders aren't being served special treatment, but rather God enlists the insiders to reexamine the rules. It's the insiders who are being called to maintain justice, and do what is right by making a way for others to experience God's deliverance, the same way they do. The same root word in Hebrew is used for God's deliverance and our right action, the word is *tsadeq* or *tsadeqah*. It is no accident that these words are used here. God's salvation is made manifest in and through people when people prioritize living as God commands – to accept those whom God accepts, and love those whom God loves. Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement once said, "I really only love God as much as the person I love the least." Faith isn't as easy as just knowing the rules. Faith, deep and transformational, trust in God, moves us to love more deeply and live more freely for others. Faith calls us to look and listen to what God is doing in the here and now, and to choose God's justice and mercy, not just for us and those we know and love best, but for those we know and love least.

For those of us who hear this word as insiders, there is both great joy in discovering together what new things God is doing among us, and great responsibility to commit to whatever new things God may be doing to bring salvation to the world today.

From another perspective, consider what outsiders hear in this Word from God. It sounds like invitation to a party you never thought you'd be invited to, or it is inclusion in a family who you never thought would accept you. When the people of God have embraced this invitational way of life, it has transformed lives and communities. Addicts have gotten sober and found God's redemption when churches have opened their space to Anonymous Groups. Refugees have found new lives when welcomed by people in churches like ours. People in the LGBT+ community, who have been abandoned or condemned by family and their faith communities have found God's love and acceptance that they never thought possible in churches like ours. Faithful women with a call from God on their heart to serve the church as pastors and bishops have had that call affirmed in churches like ours. This wide-open inclusion does not negate the inclusion of people for whom this is not their experience, it simply makes it possible for others to experience what some have never had to question. What God declares about inclusion of the outcasts and foreigners is that this inclusion is to be





celebrated and embraced. So that insiders and outsiders find their shared identity in God's salvation as part of the household of God.

Sometimes I think we miss God's salvation among us. Can it be that sometimes the routine of worship becomes such that we forget how great a gift it is? When I feel like I'm missing the celebration I have learned to look to the children in our congregation to remind me.

A few of us saw a glimpse of this celebration on Wednesday night this past week. Before worship Jen Gruendler, our Youth and Young Adult Minister, was asking some of our kids if they would like to help with communion that night. JoJo Cozine, who is a kindergartener was thrilled to be asked to hold the empty basket. Then Jen went to JoJo's older sister Julia. When Jen asked her if she wanted to help too, Julia exclaimed, "Wait! There's communion tonight!?! This is only the second time in my whole life I've had communion. No, I don't want to help tonight. I just want to receive it!"

Her wonder and excitement for God's salvation in bread and wine was like shining a huge spotlight on the gift we all receive when we receive communion. She was the insider - the one who knew deep in her bones how great God's love was and she was inviting all of us who heard her to see what she saw, to feel what she felt, and to remember that to be included in the household of God was something to celebrate and savor.

We all could use something to celebrate and savor these days. We are living in a time when reimagining the rules is the norm. The question is are we reimagining how we live so that more are included in God's deliverance, and more are experiencing the grace we have so freely been given? Are the ways we act and speak of others helping those who are alienated or injured by the world hear that salvation is near? God is with us, for you, for all. Whether we consider ourselves insiders or outsiders, God's salvation is coming near. May we be the kind of community in which we celebrate and savor that amazing gift, and live like we know it is true. Amen.

