

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“An Everlasting Home”
Acts 8:32-39
Isaiah 56:1-7**

**Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 20, 2017**

Acts 8:32-39

Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

Isaiah 56:1-7

Thus says the Lord: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, and the son of man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”; and let not the eunuch say, “Behold, I am a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 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.

“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.”

“An Everlasting Home”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

For the last few weeks we took an intensive look at one chapter from Paul’s letter to the Romans. This week we’re going to give the New Testament a break and love on the Old Testament for a little bit. Before we do, I want to give a little background to the Book of Isaiah. Isaiah is one of the most important books for the Jews. You have to Torah, which are the first five books of the Bible, the Psalms, and then Isaiah. In fact, of the 235 Dead Sea Scrolls, there are twenty-two copies of Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah can be separated into three distinct sections: prophecies of exile, prophecies of liberation, and prophecies of righteousness. The context for our passage this morning is the third section. Truth be told, chapter fifty-six starts this section of postexilic

prophecy. These prophecies are meant for the Jews who have returned from the Babylonian Exile.

In the collective memory of Judaism and the Jewish people, the Babylonian Exile stands as a major turning point, alongside the Exodus, the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and the Holocaust. Until that point in history, the Exile was the greatest, most devastating thing to happen to Israel. The people of God are ripped away from the land that God had promised. They are taken into a foreign land, forced to live under a foreign culture, and, at times, harassed into worshiping foreign gods. You can imagine some of the questions these folks had. For instance, the Temple was the place where God stayed. If someone wanted to interact with God directly, he would go to the Temple. But the Babylonians destroyed it. If there is no more Temple, then where's God? A lot of the middle portion of the Book of Isaiah speaks to the reality that God is not absent, even though the Temple is destroyed. Instead, God is actually working to bring about their salvation and liberation.

Trauma like the Exile really affects people. People change when they experience tragedy. Some may become angry and lash out at things that remind them of their tragic experience. Some may become activists and try to bring about a positive change from their tragic experience. Others may become secluded or isolationist, trying to distance themselves from the memory of tragedy. The Israelites were no different. You may recall in the Gospels the group known as the Samaritans. These were Jews who were left behind during the Exile. They mingled with the remaining tribes and developed a form of Judaism that was different, more influenced by surrounding cultures. When the Babylonian Exile came to an end, and the exiles returned, they discovered a group of people who were similar, and yet different. One of the reactions to this was to shun and disown the Samaritans for muddying the religious waters.

What was of primary concern for these returning Israelites was the preservation of their culture. One of the first things done at their return was to rebuild the Temple that was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. Religion was, and sometimes still is, very much a part of Jewish identity. But before they could rebuild, we see that Isaiah needed to instruct them. "They still suffered from idolatry, hypocrisy, and indifference. Isaiah prophesies concerning their responsibilities toward the coming glorious kingdom and the certainty of its arrival."¹ You would think that after a traumatic experience like the Exile, the Israelites would be more understanding, more welcoming. Instead, we can infer from Isaiah, that they continued to reject foreigners and eunuchs. Now, I can only conjecture as to why foreigners and eunuchs were isolated in Israel's contempt. For the returning exiles, keeping Israel's traditions and culture alive was paramount in the wake of a national crisis. We can assume that eunuchs were rejected because they were unable to reproduce. It's likely the case "during the Exile, Israelites in various lands may have been forced into this degrading servitude."² In the minds of some Israelites, these folks were unwelcome because they could not benefit the perpetuation of culture.

Similarly, Isaiah mentions foreigners, or proselytes. These were folks who became Jewish, but did not come from an Israelite heritage. It wasn't uncommon for Jews in exile to find themselves

working alongside their Babylonian captors. In the field, in the shop, even in the courts. The Bible records the stories of Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah, and others; folks who worked and lived and died in Babylon. Surely they spoke of their God to their neighbors. Surely some of those neighbors felt moved by God's Spirit to join the fellowship of God's children. These folks were ethnically Babylonian, ethnically Persian, and they were also believers, adherents to the Law of Moses. But even this belief and adherence did not protect them from bigotry. Undoubtedly there were some who looked at these foreign converts with suspicious eyes. "These are not true Israelites," they would say, "because they are not descendants of Israel." The sin of racial supremacy is not limited to our culture. It is, nevertheless, a sin.

In the wake of the recent events in Charlottesville, I would be remiss in my duties as a Christian and as a pastor if I failed to comment on the evil that is racism. I have doubts that my Puerto Rican ancestors participated in the Civil War. But what my ancestors did experience, what many people have and continue to experience are the very real threats of racial supremacy. My friends, this is ungodly behavior. Racism is unchristian. Social Darwinism is antithetical to everything the Reformed tradition holds and represents. No race, no ethnicity, no nationality has the market on superiority. There are two things...at least two things...that every single one of us have in common: we are all sinful, broken people; and we are all made in the image of God.

Isaiah tells us that Israel sinned when she refused to recognize and respect the foreigners and eunuchs in her midst. Sure, there are differences among people. People speak differently, people live differently, and yes, people even look differently. But all of these divisions, most of which are social constructs, but even the physical ones, all of them mean nothing to God. The only division God sees is whether or not his creation obeys him. That's it; that's the only thing God cares about. God doesn't care about race, gender, language, nationality, or what have you. That was proven to us on the day of Pentecost. That truth has been an essential tenet of the faith since before the birth of Christ.

What's the dividing line for God? What does verse one say? Thus says the Lord: "I love you only if you're white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant." No! Thus says the Lord: "The people of European heritage are better than everyone else." No! Verse one reads, "Thus says the Lord: 'Keep justice, and do righteousness.'" There's a beautiful continuity to Scripture that proves to me it is divinely inspired. On the front end of the Bible you have the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments can be divided into two tables, or two sections: laws pertaining to our relationship with God and laws pertaining to our relationship with one another. On the other end of the Bible you have Jesus' answer to the Greatest Commandment, which comes in two sections: to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And right here, pretty much in the middle of the Bible, you have the Prophet Isaiah proclaiming the Lord's precept: keep justice and do righteousness.

Racism and racial superiority are symptoms of a greater evil. That evil is sin. Sin distorts our image of ourselves and of our neighbors. Sin confounds us into believing some people are better than others simply because they may be of this race or come from this lineage. Israel was guilty

of this. But this does not excuse the Christian. Just because we all sin and fall short of God's glory does not give us the excuse to indulge in sinning or be indulgent of sinning. The People of God are charged with a double calling. With one step we give all that we are to God. We live in righteousness to him and we live in witness of him. With the other step we give all honor and love that we would give to ourselves, to our neighbors, to those whom we may consider different. We live with a sense of justice on our hearts, seeking after the goodwill of all our neighbors, and especially those who may be outcasts. We're going to differ on things. No one of us is identical; no one of us has the same attitudes and appetites as another. We come with varying abilities and varying experiences. So yes, I know there are and there will be differences between us. But these differences have no standing on our relationship with God or how we are to treat one another.

And yes, I know each of us is sinful. Every one of us has sinned and will sin. No one of us is perfect. God knows this, and yet he is still willing to love us, he's still willing to forgive us. But this does not give us the license to revel in sin and sinning. God calls each of us to actively strive to move away from sin and the love of sinning. Yes we will fail. A very dear friend of mine, in fact he was one of my groomsmen, he's six-foot-something, muscular, chiseled, and a black man. Even though he looks like he could break a man in two, he's actually one of the kindest, compassionate, and most humble people I know. We've had conversations about the latent racism that permeates society. He's told me that when he walks down the street, he's seen women draw their purses closer to themselves or men give him a wide breadth. The guy teaches Spanish at a Catholic School. He's no thug. And yet, sin's presence means people will eye him with suspicion. And that's wrong. I know it's wrong, and I do it too when I allow thoughts of suspicion and prejudice cloud my mind at the sight of a Muslim in the airport. That's wrong. We put sin to death, as Paul told us several weeks ago, by banishing from our thoughts and hearts all prejudices and assumptions. We have to actively do it. We have to actively and consciously chip away at racism within ourselves and within our community. Racism isn't the only ill effect of sin, I know. I'm pinpointing racism today because of what happened last week. Racism and every other act of sin that severs our relationship with God and our relationship with our neighbors, must be put to death. In this way, we can live into the Kingdom of God, where God's house is a house of prayer for all peoples.

Let us pray. God and Father of mankind, you've created each of us in your image and have called us to be your children and your people. Lord, you are truly the purest unifying force. For in you there is neither Jew nor Greek, Black nor White, Rich nor Poor, but only Christ. Help us to be conformed to his image: The image of righteousness and justice. The image of compassion and hospitality. Help us as we endeavor to purge ourselves of sinful desires and sinful longings. Grow within us the fruit of patience and gentleness, so that we may be your faithful witnesses in this broken world. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

¹ *Reformation Study Bible*, 1229.

² *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5, page 656.