

Sermon for August 22: Gathering Together

Based on Isaiah 66:18-23

Gathering the nations together peacefully would have sounded ridiculous to Isaiah's original hearers, but not to us. Every year, Beloit College releases its Mindset List, describing the ways that the incoming class of college freshmen thinks about the world, what events have shaped their lives. Some of them serve to make us feel old, when we realize that they have never known a baseball commissioner other than Bud Selig; that Clint Eastwood is better known as a sensitive director than as Dirty Harry, and that Fergie is a pop singer, not a princess. Other points show the impact that technology has had on them, since they never twisted the coiled handset wire aimlessly around their wrists while chatting on the phone and they don't wear watches, since their cell phones always have the correct time.

The most interesting statements for today's purposes are the ones that show how multicultural and multinational we've become. For the class of 2014, a quarter of the class has at least one immigrant parent, Korean cars have always been a staple on American highways, Americans and Russians have always lived together in space, and they've never had to worry about Russian missile strikes on the US. The U.S, Canada, and Mexico have always agreed to trade freely, and American companies have always done business in Vietnam. It's a brave, new, multicultural world. Here in Ames, the influx of international students to ISU shows the nations coming here to learn. Siemens, Sauer Danfoss, and other companies bring in their own workers from outside the US. The nations are already gathering together here.

But why are they coming? For economic opportunity, for education, for freedom, for a chance at a new life? Those may be good things, but they're not necessarily God things. That's not the picture that Isaiah gives us. For Isaiah, the nations are gathered together to worship the one, true God.

That was a radical departure for the people of Isaiah's day. Writing over 2700 years ago, the first half of Isaiah warns God's chosen people in the kingdom of Judah what was coming. They'd seen the northern kingdom of Israel invaded and taken into exile by the Assyrians, yet they still refused to fully trust God. Because of that, Isaiah warns them that they, too, will be taken into exile as punishment for turning from God. When other nations are mentioned, they are mentioned as either tools God will use in his punishments, or as warnings or examples of what is to come. If the nations met together, it was purely for military matters. People didn't gather together peacefully. There's a reason most cultures in the world divide everyone into two groups; us or them.

The second half of Isaiah, though, paints a different picture. A picture of hope and happiness, of restoration and rescue. Looking ahead to the future, Isaiah saw that God would save his people, rescue them from their exile, restore them to freedom. And here in the last chapter of the whole book, we see that the message of salvation and rescue was not for just those who had been God's people. Instead, God would gather people of all nations together to worship God. In a radical departure from Old Testament practices, the priests would no longer come from just a small tribe of Israelites. Instead, the priests would come from all nations, all peoples.

The picture we get in Isaiah of the nations being gathered together comes from more than economic prosperity, political freedom, or military necessity. The nations are brought together to worship God. Although there are glimpses of this plan in the Old Testament, it's not until the New Testament that we see the plan begin to work.

At Pentecost we hear about God doing a new thing. Instead of only being able to hear God's words in Hebrew, God speaks through the disciples in the languages of the people. Instead of only the priests speaking for God, we hear the disciples and those with them speaking in a multitude of languages about all that God had done through Jesus in his crucifixion and resurrection. We see people of all nations gathered together and hearing about the one, true God. We see how the Holy Spirit used the disciples to talk in the "heart languages" of the people gathered there.

As we hear in Luther's explanation of the 3rd article of the Apostles' Creed, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us. It is through the Holy Spirit that we were all brought to faith. It is through the Holy Spirit working through the Word read by our parents or friends or ourselves, the Holy Spirit moving our families to bring us to the waters of Baptism, that we heard the Gospel call and were gathered among the people of God. The Holy Spirit sends us out, too, to call those to faith around us, no matter how different from us they may be.

As we have been gathered together this morning at the beginning of another academic year at Iowa State, we come from different backgrounds. From the "Greatest Generation" through Baby Boomers to Millennials, we come from different ages. We come from all corners of Iowa, from all corners of the United States, from China and Ethiopia and Sudan and South Africa and all over the world. We are mothers and fathers, parents and children. Students in agriculture, engineering, liberal arts or something completely different. Freshmen who are still getting used to Ames, seniors or grad students who can't wait to leave. Yet we have all been gathered together this morning to worship the one true God, just as Isaiah predicted.

As we are gathered together by God, we know that we have a God who forgives us. A God who gave his Son for us. A God who sends us out to bring others to know him, to "proclaim the glory of God among the nations" (Isaiah 66:19), so that "people will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). And as we share in a foretaste of that feast to come in Holy Communion, as we are joined with all those who have gone before us in the faith, and with the church throughout all the world, it's an amazing thing. It's a miraculous thing. People of all nations gathered together to worship God was good enough for Isaiah to end his book, but Pentecost was only the beginning for the New Testament church. It's a good way for me to end a sermon, and for us to begin a new school year.