Sermon on Isaiah 56 – We Are God’s Gathered People!

This is what the Lord says: “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant— these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” The Sovereign Lord declares—he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.”

This morning I would like you to open your bulletins to the sermon for rally day page and answer the questions at the top of the page. How long have you been a member of Good Shepherd? What brought you to Good Shepherd? What blessings have you experienced as a member of Good Shepherd? What keeps you coming back? These were some of the questions asked of our Ministry Coordinating Council some time ago. I was amazed at the wide variety of answers. “I’ve been here since the beginning. I’ve been here since I was a kid. I’ve only been here a few years. I came here through the school. I came here because my company transferred me to the area. I enjoy the fellowship I have with my brothers and sisters in Christ. I enjoy the sermons and the Bible classes. I see how my children have grown in our school. I love learning about Jesus. I love hearing God’s Word in its truth and purity.”

What about you? How long have you been here? What brought you here? What blessings have you experienced? What keeps you coming back? I know where you live and I can only guess how many other churches you pass on the way to Good Shepherd every weekend. Why not just go with the one that’s closest to you? With the price of gas nowadays, it would sure save you some time and money. Why are you here? We’re here because God brought us here. That’s right. The psalmist writes, “all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be,” which means that God has guided and directed the course of our lives to bring us here to this place at this time for this reason, to grow in His Word and go with His Word. Yes, We Are God’s Gathered People! I. Gathered together around His Word. II. Gathered together to share His Word.

Scripture tells us about the great lengths to which God is willing to go to gather his people together. It was no easy task during the time of the prophet Isaiah just like it’s no easy task today. Isaiah came at a time when people weren’t taking much time for God and His Word. People who were physically wealthy but spiritually bankrupt. People who enjoyed the pleasures and treasures of the world but neglected the pleasures and treasures of God’s Word.

So where do we begin? Begin by taking time to gather around God’s Word. God tells us, “These I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer.” “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.” “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Gathered by, chosen by, and belonging to God. Different people with different backgrounds, different talents, different gifts, different personalities, different opinions as to how things should be done. Too often we focus on the things we don’t have in common instead of the things that we do which is why the Apostle Paul tells us, “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” We often refer to believers in heaven as the Church Triumphant. We often refer to believers on earth as the Church Militant. It’s called the Church Militant because we do battle with the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. How sad when we forget about this and begin battling each other. Arguing, bickering, fighting, gossiping, slandering, tearing others down rather than building them up, failing to take the words and actions of others in the kindest possible way. These are the kinds of things that weaken the body of Christ instead of strengthening it. We know this, do we always show this? God’s Word calls these things downright sinful and deserving of the punishment of hell. It’s at times...
like these that all of God’s people need to gather up their sins and carry them to the cross in repentance, focusing on the full and free forgiveness that is ours in Jesus our Savior.

Because in our text God tells us, “my salvation is close at hand, my righteousness will soon be revealed.” For the people of Israel at the time of the prophet Isaiah, God’s forgiveness was theirs through the Promised Messiah who was yet to come. For us, God’s forgiveness is ours through the Promised Messiah who has come. On the night of his birth God gathered angels together to sing his praises. On the night of his birth God gathered shepherds together to go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ was born. Throughout his life, Jesus gathered people together around his Word telling them that, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” The best news of all tells us how Jesus gathered all of our sins together and carried them to the cross. On that day, the powers of sin, death, and the devil gathered together to try and defeat him, but they failed. In the end, Jesus defeated them, and in so doing, we have as well. It would cost him his life, but in his death, we have forgiveness. He would rise from the grave, and in so doing he gives us the sure hope of the same, along with the gift of eternal life in heaven. On the day of Pentecost, God gathered people from around the world to Jerusalem. Working through God’s Word, the Holy Spirit would gather thousands of more people into God’s family. Strengthened and motivated by God’s Word, those people would carry the good news to the end of the earth right down to the family of believers we call Good Shepherd.

Three bricklayers were once asked what they were doing. The first said, “I’m laying bricks.” The second said, “I’m building a wall.” The third said, “can’t you see? I’m building a cathedral!” He wasn’t just a bricklayer. He understood the big picture of life was all about. What about you? Are you laying bricks or are you building a cathedral? By the grace of God through faith in Jesus, you could say that God’s building a cathedral where Jesus is the foundation and the chief cornerstone and we are the living stones being laid on top. Living stones gathered together to grow in His Word and share His Word so that God might gather even more people into his family. On this the tenth anniversary of 9 / 11, we are reminded of the importance of sharing God’s Word with a world that so desperately needs it. God tells us, “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.” “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Look around you. It doesn’t take much to see how God has blessed Good Shepherd over the years. It’s not anything we’ve done, but rather what God has accomplished through us. By grace alone, by faith alone, by Scripture alone, God blesses his people according to his will. By the grace of God, we see what Good Shepherd is and we know what Good Shepherd could be. But these things can only happen as all of God’s people take time for the one thing needful in life, namely God’s Word. Take time for God’s Word by coming to church and Bible class and Sunday School. That’s how the Holy Spirit builds and strengthens the Church by raising up spiritually mature people who know God’s Word and God’s will. People who apply God’s Word to their own hearts and lives and joyfully share it with others. People who know how God wants us to deal with those around us, loving and serving them just as our Savior loved and served us.

Don’t just take my Word for it, take God’s Word for it. Take God’s Word for it by growing in it on a daily basis. Take God’s Word for it by taking it to heart and then taking it to the hearts of others. God’s Word is where the power lies, not in pastors or teachers or leaders or volunteers, not in the decisions we make in voters meetings or in committees or councils. The power lies in the Holy Spirit working through the Word. Never underestimate the power of God’s Word when it comes to changing hearts and lives, not only for those on the inside looking around, but also for those on the outside looking in. May the Holy Spirit lead us to see what the hymn writer tells us, “we all are one in mission; we all are one in call, our varied gifts united by Christ, the Lord of all. A single great commission compels us from above To plan and work together that all may know Christ’s love.”

Amen.