

Sermon Text for October 6, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 60:1-3, Matthew 14:34-36 *“A light to the nations”*

I wrote down all the countries where I have taken communion and I wanted to share that list with you: United States, Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize, Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, England, Scotland, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Russia, Belarus, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany both East and West, Austria, Switzerland, Finland, Sweden, Latvia, Estonia, Vatican City, Jamaica, Barbados, Holland, and most recently, Iceland. I say the names of these countries to you not to bring attention to myself, but to remind us that this gift of communion is a gift from God to all of his people all around the world.

This sacrament that we celebrate, this holy act, over history has divided churches even to this day. I can think of no sin which has greater impact upon our world than the sin of exclusion from this sacrament. People from other churches not being allowed to celebrate together this sacrament that brings us to a life changing realization that Jesus died for all of us on the cross and gave his life to all of us so that we would all be saved. The Strasburg Ministerium has broken that sin of exclusivity by taking communion together on our Thanksgiving service. I can't encourage you enough to be a part of that simply so that you can see how Lutherans and Methodists, and non-denominational people, and Mennonites are willing to tear down centuries of division by taking communion together.

Both of our Scriptures this World Communion Sunday depict people streaming to the presence of God to receive something from God. It causes us to ask the questions of what does it mean when Scripture says that we are to be a light to the world, not just to Strasburg, or even to this nation, but to the world. Do we even know what that means, or even more importantly what responsibilities do we have as a church because we are called to be a light to the world? Let's go ahead and read.

READ

This isn't the only time in the Bible, and this isn't the only time in Isaiah where we read that the people of God are to be a light to the nations. We have to expose some obvious assumptions that I am making in this Scripture. Anytime that I talk about the people of God from this pulpit you know that I'm talking about us, right? So when I say that Isaiah speaks about the people of God are to be a light to the nations I am not just talking about the people of Israel thousands of years ago, I am talking about us today as well. I want to be sure that you are

willing to self-define as the people of God. Just know that even though you may not be willing to do that, I am, and that is what I'm talking about. We are called to be a light to the nations because the people of God, that's us, are called to be a light to the nations.

We see that concept all throughout the Bible and Isaiah. We are a day away from the 1 year anniversary of the bloody raid into Israel which was the deadliest attack against the Jewish people since the Holocaust. Over 1,200 Israelis were killed, and while not all of them were Jewish, the vast majority of them were. It is in our first Scripture in Isaiah where we read about darkness covering the earth and thick darkness the peoples. This time will be seen as some of the darkest, as the thickest darkness in the history of the people.

But Isaiah doesn't leave us in the dark and I don't want to quickly skip over this tragedy as if everything is now okay because hey, the light is shining. It is not, there remain captives, the region is on the brink of a war that could engulf all of us. These are world events of a biblical scale, and I don't say that lightly. We are here as people of faith trying to understand our lives and our world through the eyes of Scripture, and today Scripture is speaking to us about something we clearly understand. Isaiah and his people were taken captive into Babylon in this Scripture, so when he says a light is going to come, he isn't saying it from a place of security, he is saying it from a place of slavery and captivity.

But we are people of hope and there is mention in Isaiah in vs. 2 of the glory of the Lord rising up on us. The Isaiah scripture actually ends with this image of the nations streaming to Israel, to the people of God because of their light, drawn to the witness and the testimony of their relationship with the creator God. Now, is this something where we can pick and choose which nations come to the light and experience God as a result of the light that emanates from the people of God? We know that Jonah fled from God because he was told to bring the good news to the enemies of Israel.

Like can we choose not to have Iran stream to God, and just have the nations that we like come to God? If we were picking and choosing maybe we would leave out Iran, and Russia, and China, probably Belarus as well. But that isn't something we are allowed to do. All the nations stream to God because of the witness of the people of God according to Isaiah, we can't pick and choose. What does John 3:16, for God so loved the world. We catch here in the Old Testament a glimpse of God's shocking inclusive claim that is carried even further in the New Testament. This claim that his love, his light is for all nations and we are to not distinguish one or the other.

We can easily fall into a trap of what I call American exceptionalism. We can easily create a false narrative that has God favoring us over other nations or creating within us a desire

to be first over all other nations. The Book of Mormon is perfectly suited for that, God speaks to Joseph Smith and says that this country is exceptional and favored over all over countries. As originally written the Mormon theology favored white men as being chosen by God to carry out God's plans. World communion Sunday is a strong no to that, Jesus in Matthew and all of Isaiah and all of Scripture is a strong no to that.

Let's look at Matthew where we see that Jesus lands just a couple miles south of his home town and gets out of the boat after a fairly traumatic time of his disciples in the middle of the sea in a storm. Peter is still probably shaken up and they are all soaking wet. Since they are close to home the people of that village know who they are and when they see Jesus they mob him and bring all of the sick from the region, everyone who had anything that needed healing they gathered around Jesus.

They begged him to be able to touch just his cloak, the fringe the Greek says which are the tassels that religious leaders and others would wear to indicate that they are following the law. These same fringes that the woman with the issue of blood touched 6 chapters earlier and was healed as a result. And just like her anyone in the crowd who touched Jesus, anyone, was healed. Jesus did not sit on a throne and decide who was going to be able to be healed and who wasn't. Everyone who touched Jesus was healed, the word for healed in Greek is also saved, so everyone who touched Jesus was able to be saved, to be healed.

Think of that image for a moment and put it together with the Isaiah image of the nations flooding to the light of God. Isaiah 42:6 speaks about being a light to the nations, all of the nations, all of the people in this instance. Jesus does not set up barriers to prevent people from coming to him. All are welcome and this is what we find in World Communion. All are welcome. This is so different from what we found in chapter 8 after he cast out the demon and threw it into the swine and they ran off a cliff into the sea. The people of that town begged him to leave.

I'm afraid that we may have a hint of that in ourselves as well. Instead of being a light to the nations as Isaiah states, isn't there a part of you that wants to pick and choose who gets in and who doesn't get in? Certainly within a geo-political context you can't take this Scripture literally can you? Why do we differentiate? Our responsibility as followers of Jesus Christ is to be a light to the nations, to all people, whether they are legal or not, whether they are from this country or not. World Communion Sunday is the Sunday of all Sundays to recognize this. Our natural tendency, and our cry for safety makes us want to pick and choose which nations and which people do we allow to come to the light of Jesus.

This is where current thinking on immigration clashes clearly with our theology and our walk with Jesus. We can't believe in American exceptionalism or American exclusivity and be a light to the nations as described by Isaiah and a Jesus who allowed all people of all the region to be healed by him.

World Communion Sunday is about recognizing that the God that we worship, the Jesus whom we serve has not chosen this nation over other nations. There is no room for a theology which puts this nation first. There is no room for a belief system that revolves around the premise that God smiles upon us and curses other nations. Jesus died for the Jew and the Muslim, for the Israeli settler and the Palestinian behind walls, for the Republican and the democrat and he does not take sides one against the other. God has claimed all of us and so we have to be a light to all nations and allow all nations to come to it. Amen.