

"THE DOORS OF THE CHURCH ARE OPEN...COME IN" – ISAIAH 55:1-9

The Third Sunday in Lent

By: Reverend Brenton Miles Brock

According to Bishop Adam J. Richardson, "The doors of the Church are open" is an announcement made at nearly every service.¹ As clergy of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, we typically make this grand announcement at the end of each service, but its location within the typical service should not devalue its importance or significance. Instead, this announcement should be read as the culmination of each service, or in other words the most important portion of every service. What makes this announcement so significant is the duality presented within its proclamation. Simultaneously, it is both an announcement and an invitation; a great invitation to the Lord's salvation geared towards those within the congregation, to accept Jesus Christ as his/her/their Lord and Savior. While it is a joy to have new physical members of the local church, our ultimate goal is to extend the gift of salvation, found only in Jesus Christ, adding members to the larger body of Christ. Moreover, our task as clergy is to fearlessly and continuously proclaim to our hearers this announcement, "The doors of the Church are open! Your Savior has come, and he's coming again," while subliminally asking the question, "Will you come?"

Such an announcement and invitation is not only a historical tradition of African Methodism but also a tradition of the prophets within the Old Testament. Specifically, in the book of Isaiah, chapter 55: 1-9, we discover the origins of such an announcement and invitation presented by the prophet Isaiah though in a less contemporary formality. The book of Isaiah is a vision of hope for sinners through the coming Messiah, promising for the "ransomed" people of God a new world where sin and sorrow will be forever forgotten.² Isaiah's purpose is to call the nation of Judah back to God and to tell of God's salvation through the Messiah. The prophet Isaiah speaks more about the

¹ AME Church, "The Doors of the Church Are Still Open," AME Church, June 20, 2015, <https://www.ame-church.com/news/the-doors-of-the-church-are-still-open/>

² ESV study bible

Messiah than does any other Old Testament prophet.³ However, Isaiah is recorded on several occasions, in chapters prior, seeking to compel Judah to *come* to God in one circumstance or another. The social location of the nation of Judah is that of exile and captivity. The nation of Judah had become people in both physical and spiritual exile due to their rebellion and refusal to respond to this great invitation.

This exile could have been avoided, had the people of Judah responded to the great invitation earlier. We see in times past how to this open invitation of salvation was extended to the nation of Judah, yet they sought redemption in temporal sources. For example, Isaiah sought to compel King Ahaz to *come* to God's protection rather than trust his political machinations. And, King Hezekiah attempted to buy peace with Assyria. But the fact that the Lord is still inviting them to *come*, by way of his prophet Isaiah, despite their history of rebellion, against trusting God, speaks to God's unfailing love. Isaiah, God's representative, expresses this love and again speaks to the nation of Judah in a manner which can be read as an "opening of the doors of the church." What Chapter 55 dramatically exemplifies is not only this unfailing love of God, for the nation of Judah, but also demonstrates the vacillation process in the thinking of this nation about the attainment of salvation through temporal and spiritual sources. This posits a critical question of reflection for us on today during this Lenten season, "What we as a Christian nation, and denomination trust for personal and political salvation?"

I read this text as one that speaks to our Christian nation today. Though the United States is not physically displaced, we might do well to see ourselves as a Christian nation whose current state is one of spiritual exile, given our continuous decision to rebel against following the Lordship of Christ as a Christian nation. We are in spiritual exile. The symptoms of such exile manifest in ways such as mass incarceration rates drastically increasing, immigrant children engaged and molested by government officials, police brutality of black bodies, invasion of Black Christian churches by white terrorists, the President of the United States of America and other political officials of the United States threatening affordable healthcare, women's agency stripped and political subjugation of their bodies, molestation of young teenage girls and boys in both Christian churches and society at large. We have come to a place of spiritual rebellion and exile.

³ *Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016), 1417.

Foremost there are benefits to such a spiritual exile. The absence of certain comforts and privileges create an appetite and makes room for the presence of God. If we are to take the biblical account earnestly, we can be assured that we serve a God who despite our record of rebellion persists in love, compelling each of us, and our Nation, to *come*. Remember, the physical and spiritual exile of the nation of Judah could have been avoided, had the people of Judah responded to the invitation earlier. And, this leads us into a critical examination of the role of the prophet, preacher and every person of the Christian faith during times of spiritual and physical exile and bondage.

I imagine our own AMEC clergy at the altars across our country to standing as the prophet Isaiah making this announcement and invitation. Will you come? Each Sunday, the doors of the church open, yet we remain in our seats unwilling to *come*. Today, we must reflect and remember the critical role of "opening the doors of the church." However, the key to open the door seems to be one word: *come*. This word the God employs through Isaiah seemingly is simple. However, this one word is complex. It is in this complex, yet a simple word that God challenges the nation of Judah to come to a new place of thinking and way of being in the world. It took a new, yet higher level of thinking which meant that these people had to leave old habits of behavior and thought behind. In verse 8, the Lord says, "My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts."⁴ This episode also provides us today with encouragement with the side effects of "one word" from the mouth of the Lord shifts our thinking and changes our lives.

In this "one word" from the Lord are direction, promise, purpose, forgiveness, love, provision, nourishment, and soul food. In many instances, these people had become impoverished by this spiritual rebellion and physical fatigue. What this text teaches us on today is how powerful just one word from the mouth of God avails. And, I can imagine now how for most of us the reason we enter into his gates with praise is that at some point in our lives one Word of God has changed our lives. Some of us come to church for a variety of reasons. The choir members may come to church to sing. The preacher may come to preach. The ushers may only come to serve. The finance team may come to count the money. The congregants may only come out of ritualistic obligation and popular culture. But, there are some of us who come to hear merely "one word" from the Lord.

⁴ *Life Application Study Bible*, 1529.

A similar word, as presented by Isaiah that gives protection when trouble is all around. Some of us enter the house of prayer for the complexities found in one word from the Lord. For some of us we "come," which means we leave so much behind and focus on God. Another component of this term *come* is the reality that to come, or go, anywhere one must leave his/her/their current location. The text teaches us how and why repentance is important. In Isaiah's announcement to come, was a declaration that must be taken seriously and not forgotten. We must turn from our low-level thinking, animalistic behaviors, and wickedness. As someone once said, "It is easy to go, but hard to leave." Personally, it is hard to leave the sin that so easily besets us. It is not always easy, but with the help of the Holy Spirit, we have comfort and refuge. It is hard for the United States as a nation to turn from her wicked ways of structural sin and violence in the manifestations of racism, xenophobia, sexism, Islamophobia, homophobia, political bullying, economic injustice, capitalism, and so many more. What the Lord is saying to today seems simple, but not always easy. However, it is our task to answer the question, "As a nation, what will we trust for our salvation?" Today, we must *come*, which means leaving our current state of affairs, and trust in Jesus Christ!

In this proclamation, found in chapter 55, Isaiah invites the Nation of Judah to leave those material things of comfort and false senses of salvation. He invites them to come and think higher thoughts. His invitation and proclamation provide direction, promise, purpose, forgiveness, love, provision, nourishment, and soul food. What God highlights through the voice of Isaiah is the reality that the nation of Judah has again have sought salvation in temporal resources. What Isaiah calls the nation of Judah to do in his invitation is to come and leave your ways of doing, being, and thinking to then trust God for every need. God does this by merely inviting the nation of Judah to leave the material world and enter the thoughts of God which prioritize the current state of our soul.

Today, as we reflect upon the season of Lent, we must have ears to hear the announcement of Isaiah and respond to this great invitation both personally and politically. It is tempting to view Judah through a self-righteous and unsympathetic lens; however, an investigation of the southern kingdom of Judah's trust issues becomes most redemptive when seen as a microcosm of the heart of humanity. In other words, we too are just as prone to seek salvation in that which is temporal. The prophet Isaiah opens the doors of the church and challenges us to reflect upon what Jesus Christ has done. Based on what Christ has done, God *freely* offers forgiveness to all who turn to him in faith. This encouragement to repent is the invitation of us to "come." Today, I want us to critically

reflect upon what Isaiah is challenging us within this call, challenge, and charge to "come." Today, wherever you understand that the doors of the church are open for you. Come. Leave your temporal senses of salvation and freely receive the gift of Jesus Christ. Will you come? Reflect upon this portion of the book of Isaiah, imagine the closing of morning service, and picture this strong and courageous clergyperson of God, fearlessly 'opening the doors of the church,' and asking the congregants, "Come and drink. Come, take your choice of wine or milk. Come to me with your ears wide open."



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