



Sermon Transcript November 25, 2018

Hospitable God, Hospitable People A World Wide Worshiping Community Isaiah 66:15-24

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 25, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Isaiah 66:15-24

¹⁵ “For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. ¹⁶ For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many. ¹⁷ “Those who sanctify and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following one in the midst, eating pig's flesh and the abomination and mice, shall come to an end together, declares the Lord.

¹⁸ “For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, ¹⁹ and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations. ²⁰ And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord. ²¹ And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the Lord.

²² “For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. ²³ From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord. ²⁴ “And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”

Introduction

This morning we come to the end of our series on the third section of the book of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66. Throughout this series, we pointed out that this final section of Isaiah ends the same way it began. It begins and ends with this wonderful picture of the righteous foreigner who is now part of the people of God—a fellow worshiper of the living God.

At the beginning of this section in Isaiah 56:1-8 we read of foreigners who have joined themselves to the Lord. It says in verses 6-7, “*And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD . . . 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.*” This is the very same picture we have at the end of this section of Isaiah. In Isaiah 66:18 we hear God say, “*the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see my glory.*” Then in verse 23 he adds, “*all flesh shall come to worship before me.*” The picture we get in Isaiah 56-66 is that God is forming a world-wide worshipping community.

So one thing we learn about God in this section of Isaiah is that God is a welcoming God. This week I had the joy of welcoming home three of our four children, our daughter-in-law and my parents. With a welcoming spirit comes that greeting and that warm embrace when each of them comes through the front door. So I love this image of a welcoming God who embraces us with joy. But when this welcoming spirit is extended to the foreigner it takes it to a whole other level. Family we get. But the foreigner? This is a category of people in the land of Israel who was considered an outcast and often times an enemy and even at times an oppressor. Do you mean to tell me that God extends his welcome to these people like he does to us?

In Acts 22 we see Paul defending himself before his fellow Jews in Jerusalem. They let him freely tell his story until he said this, “*And the Lord said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’*” Then Luke writes, “*Up to this word they listened to him.*” What word? “*Gentiles.*” (Foreigners!) “*Then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’*” That is not a “welcoming spirit.” That is contrary to the welcoming spirit of God. That is contrary to what we read of God in Isaiah 56:8, “*The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.*”

As we have been making our way through Isaiah 56-66 we have also used this as an opportunity to talk about the practice of hospitality. How does hospitality apply to

Isaiah 56-66? It is simple. We want to mirror the welcoming spirit of God. Some of you read Rosaria Butterfield's book on hospitality, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. She defines radical ordinary hospitality this way: "using your Christian home in a daily way that seeks to make strangers neighbors, and neighbors family of God."¹ I like that image. There are people we encounter on a regular basis who are still strangers to us. How do we allow time for strangers to become neighbors? And once we are like neighbors, how do we look for opportunities to help them become part of the family of God? It all begins with a welcoming spirit—a spirit of hospitality.

But why? These people are different than me. They view life differently than I do. They live a different lifestyle than I do. They are culturally different than me. They vote differently than I do. Why should I be hospitable to the "foreigner?" And by foreigner, I simply mean the person who is different than me—the stranger. Isaiah gives us the reason why in this final passage in the book of Isaiah. God is in the process of gathering people from all nations and languages. He is doing it through us. God's welcome to the outcast and the foreigner—the person next door and the people you rub shoulders with every day—is to be extended through our welcome and our embrace and our hospitality.

You will soon discover that our passage this morning is a great Old Testament missionary passage. In his commentary on Isaiah, Alec Motyer says that often in the Old Testament missions is described as the nations being drawn to the mountain of God. It is as if there is this magnetic pull that attracts them to turn to God and come to God. But in the New Testament, the image is the opposite. Here the church is sent to the nations to proclaim a message. He puts the two together and he says, "that the missionary obligation of the church is to create a magnetic community and to share a saving message."² Is our community here at WEFC "magnetic?" Do people experience the welcome of God in our warm embrace and in our hospitality? And do they hear the message of the glory of God and of the God who wants to embrace them?

I want to approach this passage like an onion, one layer at a time. The outer layer—verses 15-16 and 24—deals with the issue of judgment. The second layer—verses 17 and verse 22-23 deal with the topic of worship. In verse 17 we encounter false worship and in verses 22-23 we see true worship. Then in the middle—verses 18-21 we see the witness of God's people. In other words, we discover how God is going to move people from a false worship to a true worship. He does it through you and me. As we look at each layer of this passage this morning, my prayer is that you would be motivated to be the welcoming presence of Jesus wherever you go. Why? Because God is forming a world-wide worshipping community and he is doing it through his welcoming church.

Judgment: People Need Jesus

The outer layer of this passage deals with the topic of God's judgment. In verses 15-16 there is a warning given of God's coming judgment. *"For behold, the Lord will come in fire . . . and those slain by the Lord shall be many."* Then the passage ends with the execution of God's judgment. In other words, what God said would happen—will happen. *"And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."*

A few weeks ago, I did a sermon on the judgment of God. So this morning I just want to make a couple observations about God's judgment from the first layer of this passage. But before I do, let's keep in mind what we are talking about this morning. Why should we be concerned about whether or not we are a welcoming people? Why should we want to be "magnetic" through our hospitality and our welcoming spirit? Why should we do what Gordy Grover suggested last week and open our homes to a Muslim—or anyone else from a different faith? One motivation for opening our arms to the "foreigner"—the one who is different from us—is the sobering reality that people need Jesus. I wonder if even in the church we lost sight of the holiness and the justice and the wrath of God. And so quite frankly, we are not burdened for those around us like we should be. So here are a couple of things to take note of with regards to God's judgment.

First of all, I simply ask this question. Who can stand before God's judgment? The image of God's judgment in verses 15-16 is likened to *"fire"* three times and to a *"whirlwind."* I think of the image we have fresh in our minds of the recent fires carried by the winds in California. Entire communities were leveled by these tragic fires. Nothing could withstand them. That is what the judgment of God is compared to in our passage. Oswalt says, "Human rebellion can no more stand up to the presence of God than a field of wheat can stand up to a tornado."³ At the end of Isaiah 2, Isaiah says that when that day comes, people will try to hide in caves and they will seek cover in holes in the ground as if to escape the terror of the LORD. But no escape will be found. Isaiah 2:12 says it this way, *"For the LORD of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up—and it shall be brought low."* So here is the conclusion at the end of Isaiah 2. *"Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath. What regard is he?"* Don't put your trust in yourself. You cannot stand on your own before God.

There is only one other observation I want to make of God's judgment from this passage. Do you find it interesting that after sixty-six long chapters that Isaiah chooses to end this

book the way he does? He ends with a graphic picture of the judgment of God. Throughout the book, Isaiah goes back and forth—like a tennis match—between the themes of hope and judgment. Oswalt suggests that it is a reminder to us “that out of judgment hope emerges, but hope never removes the potential and the reality of judgment.”⁴ That is true. The judgment of God is real and sure.

Outside the city of Jerusalem, in the Hinnom Valley was the town dump. The fire continued to smolder there and even Jesus used this as an image to describe the unending torment of hell. In fact Jesus quoted these words from the last verse in Isaiah when he talked about this subject. Isaiah concludes this long book with these words, “*And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.*” Interestingly, Isaiah is describing the worshiper in the new heavens and new earth coming outside the city and seeing “this cemetery” - a testimony that the justice of God has indeed come. Whether literal or not, at the very least, he is using this image to assure us that righteousness will win out and evil will be destroyed.

Isaiah begins and ends his book by noting the rebellion of man against God. He doesn’t waste any time getting to the problem in the book. In Isaiah 1:2 he says of the house of Israel, “*they have rebelled against me.*” It is the same phrase we find in this final verse, “*the men who have rebelled against me.*” I think by the way Isaiah is closing his book, he is saying to the person who might be tempted to question whether or not God will do anything about man’s rebellion, that indeed he will. Perhaps you are tempted this morning to look at generation after generation and injustice after injustice and wonder whether or not the justice of God will ever come. So in case you wonder about that, Isaiah ends with an image of God executing his judgment. And so Motyer suggest that if you have not been motivated to turn to God because of the revelation of the glory of God or the good news of the coming servant of God, “then maybe the unmistakably horrible rewards of disobedience will drive our wayward hearts to tremble at the word of the Lord.”⁵ It is Isaiah’s version of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

I am asking us to take it one step further. If the glory of God and the wonder of God’s coming servant—Jesus—isn’t enough to cause you to be the welcoming presence of God in this world, “then maybe the unmistakably horrible rewards” of those who rebel against God will drive you reach out with God’s warm embrace to the “foreigner” and the stranger and the neighbor. Next time you drive up 91 north of Hartford and see the landfill that has been covered, let it trigger the image of this passage and may it form within you a burden for “the many” who are driving their way to a Christ-less eternity.

Worship: We Have Seen the Glory of Jesus

As we pull back the second layer of this passage we discover the theme of worship. Some people think that worship is something just religious people do. But that is not true. In his book *You Are What You Love*, James Smith writes, “to say *you are what you love* is synonymous with saying *you are what you worship*. . . . We can’t not worship because we can’t not love something as ultimate.”⁶ You are worshipping something. You are loving something. There is something you find to be “ultimate.” Fundamentally our problem is an issue of worship. There is a reason why the first commandment calls us to “have no other gods before us.” There is a reason why the first request we are instructed to pray is “Hallowed be thy name.” This is the proper relationship between the creature and the Creator. We see it in Isaiah 66:2. After reminding us that God created all things, we hear God say, “*But this is the one to whom I will look; he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.*” It is the one who finds God to be ultimate.

In verse 17, Isaiah gives us just one example of false worship. I think he is referring here to what we saw in Isaiah 58. We described Isaiah 58 with this question: “Does your Sunday have any impact on your Monday?” If it doesn’t then it is empty ritual. And that is what he seems to be calling out here in verse 17 by using exaggerated language. Their empty religious ritual is no different than the blatant abomination of sacrificing a pig on the altar in the temple. It reminds us of what we hear over and over again in the Old Testament: “*obedience is better than sacrifice.*” Why? Our obedience conveys who we worship and love. So whether he is speaking to the religious Jew or the irreligious Gentile, we all have a worship problem. Paul describes it this way in Romans 1, we “*exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*” Or, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*”

So you come to verse 18 and God says, “I see it.” He says, “*For I know their works and their thoughts.*” That is a humbling statement in and of itself. It is humbling to know that our lives are lived in full view of an all knowing and all seeing God. And yet, in spite of what he knows of us, he promises to gather us to himself. He says, “*the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory.*”

Can I let you in on some of the tension that comes in trying to understand an Old Testament prophet like Isaiah? When Isaiah talks about the gathering of the nations and seeing the glory of God is he talking about the end of time when God will make all things new? At the end of this passage he does mention the new heavens and the new earth. Or, is he talking about the present time and the work of the gospel as people all

over the world respond to the message of Jesus? In the third layer of this passage we will see this missionary image of declaring the glory of God in places that are yet to hear of the fame of God. So is he talking about the future or is he talking about the present? I think the answer is “yes.” When the prophets look into the future, they often see it all as one. In Isaiah 2, Isaiah talks about the latter days when the nations will make their way to the mountain of the Lord. The writer to the Hebrews says that is happening today when he says in Hebrews 12:22, “*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . and to Jesus.*”

So yes, there is coming a day when God will literally gather people from every nation and every language and they will literally see God in all of his glory. Thomas Manton was a Puritan who wrote about the glory of God. I found it curious this week to read what word he associates with the glory of God. I wonder what word you would associate with the glory of God. Perhaps you would use holy, or unapproachable, or reverent, or something lofty like that. The word he associated with the glory of God is “happy.” The glory of God reveals that God is happy in himself and therefore Manton says, “our happiness lies in beholding God’s glory.”⁷ That is why David said in Psalm 27 that if he only had one wish he could make in life, this is what it would be—“*to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD.*” This is why Jesus prayed in John 17:24, “*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given to me, may be with me where I am to see my glory that you have give me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*” There is an eternal happiness in finding God and discovering that he is of ultimate worth.

But have we not already seen a glimpse of his glory? His creation declares his glory. We get pictures of his glory through the Scriptures, the divine revelation of God. And so we get to follow Isaiah into Isaiah 6 where he describes for us what he saw, “*I saw the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.*” But where have we most seen the glory of God on display? Isaiah mentions a *sign* in verse 19. He says, “*And they shall come and see my glory, and I will set a sign among them.*” Most commentators acknowledge that Isaiah is ambiguous as to what this sign might be. I am inclined to embrace what Motyer has to say about this *sign*. He is convinced that this passage describes the time between the first and second coming of Christ and so “*the ‘sign’ can only be his cross.*”⁸ I am drawn to that conclusion as well. We see the glory of God on display on the cross where the Son of God died for us so that we do not have to face the judgment we just talked about and so that we can be brought into the fellowship—the glory—the happiness—that comes in knowing the living God. Peter says it this way in 1 Peter 1:8, “*Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.*”

We become happy worshipers of the living God. We read in verse 23, *“From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord.”* That is another way of saying—from month to month and from week to week—there will be unceasing worship of God. That is another way of saying that we will be filled with unceasing happiness and joy. We have found God.

May I suggest that this is another motivation for why we should extend hospitality to others. In finding God, we have something everyone in this world is looking for but can't seem to find it. We have *“joy that is inexpressible.”* We have a *“peace that passes understanding.”* You can't buy it. You can manufacture it. You can muster your will power and fake it. It is a happiness only found in God and when we open our homes and our lives to others it is visible. *“There is something different about you.”* It is magnetic. When people see it in our homes and in our day to day lives—they can't deny that it is real. God is real. Jesus is real. His welcome shines through you.

Witness: Sent to Proclaim Jesus

This brings us to the final layer of this passage. It is here we discover how God is forming a world wide worshiping community. He is doing it through us. He is doing it through the church. This is why we must be concerned about hospitality. Through the gospel, we are not just invited to a relationship with God and with one another. Rather, we are invited into a relationship with a reason. And that reason is to extend the welcome of God to places that are yet to *hear of his fame or seen his glory.*

I am intrigued by the use of the words *“them”* and *“they.”* *“And from them I will send survivors to that nations . . . And they shall declare my glory among the nations . . . And they shall bring all your brothers from the nations as an offering to the Lord . . . And some of them also I will take for priests and Levites.”* Who is the *“them”* and the *“they”* in this passage. It seems to me that they come from the nations and the language groups God is gathering to himself. This is a great missions passage that sees the day in which we are currently living.

The *survivor* is the one who has tasted of the grace of God and has survived the judgment of God because of the atoning work of the servant—Jesus. And now he is going to far away places *“Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory.”* I read this week in the news of a young missionary, twenty-six years old—John Chau who was burdened to bring the gospel to a remote tribe in India. The Sentinelese reject all contact

with the outside world. But Chau wrote in his diary, “Lord, is this island Satan’s last stronghold where none have heard or even had the chance to hear your name?”⁹ He feared for his life and wrote openly about this fear in his diary. Indeed his fears materialized. The fishermen who brought him to the shores of this island saw his body being drug along the shoreline and watched them bury his body in the sand. May God do what he did when five missionary men—about the same age—were martyred in 1956 for bringing the gospel to a similar tribal group in Ecuador. With the passing of time, this tribe was transformed by the gospel.

But don’t think that this is a verse that just speaks about missions in a formal sense of the word. In this growing secular culture there are more and more people who have no understanding of the gospel. They may have an impression of the church and of evangelicals. Often, it is not the impression of the gospel we would hope they would have. And yet, we have given them cause to have faulty impressions of the church and what it means to be evangelical. There are people all around us who need to hear of God’s fame and see his glory. And so we proclaim God’s glory to the nations.

How do we do that in this day and age? I am convinced that hospitality is vital to the cause of the gospel in our culture. Unchurched people are more inclined to walk through the door of your home than they are to walk through the door of this church. Rosaria Butterfield tells the story of a neighbor who moved in next to them that no one else in their neighborhood really liked. He was the one who never mowed his grass. When she went over to introduce herself after he moved in, he disengaged the doorbell. But she was persistent and “walking their dogs” became the activity that forged this unlikely friendship. One day she saw federal agents swarming his property. He had been running a meth lab out of his home and long story short—he was sentenced and would be serving a rather long time in prison.

Listen to what Butterfield wrote about Hank: “The letters that Hank write from jail are gloomy, dark, depressed. . . . Detoxing from crystal meth is no picnic. The experience is breaking him—and the Savior he so recently and so weakly follows (Sabbath to Sabbath) . . . point to the stark reality that God is appointing all of this.” When he writes to Rosaria, he also includes a note to her children. Once he wrote, “ Please pray that God will give me more grace to get through today. I want to get out so that we can take our dog walks together. Your brother in Christ, Hank.”¹⁰ This is a picture of what Isaiah is saying in verse 20, “*And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the Lord, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries (camels), to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the Lord, just as the Israelites*

bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the Lord.”

Not only are we sent, but as a result, people will come. The road is wide open. There are no hindrances to coming to God’s grace. Like Paul says in Romans 15:16, those who come to faith through us are like an offering to God. He delights in it and he accepts anyone who comes to him through Jesus. This is why we need to be hospitable. It is our mission and God is using us to form his world wide worshiping community. Is there anything better than that?

Conclusion

God is a welcoming God. May we mirror that welcome. May we be magnetic. May we proclaim the fame of God to those who are yet to hear. Why?

God’s judgment is real and people need Jesus.

We have seen the glory of God and we have what people want. Happiness!

It is our mission and God is using us to extend his welcome to others.

¹Rosaria Butterfield *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018) Kindle Reader Location 402

²J. Alec Motyer *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993) 541

³John Oswalt *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 685

⁴Ibid., 684

⁵Motyer, 544

⁶James K. A. Smith *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016) 22

⁷Thomas Manton *An Exposition of John 17* (Evansville: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1958) 416

⁸Motyer, 541

⁹Jonna Slater and Annie Gowen “God I don’t want to die” *The Washington Post*, November 22

¹⁰Butterfield, Kindle Reader Location 3068

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What was a highlight of your Thanksgiving?
2. If hospitality is “making strangers neighbors and neighbors family of God” what are some practical steps you can take to live that out? Can you think of what this looks like with specific people you know?
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read Isaiah 66:15-16 and 24. What do you learn about God’s judgment in these verses? How does this motivate you to reach out to others?
5. Read Isaiah 66:18, Psalm 27:4 and John 17:24. Why do you think seeing God’s glory is the key to happiness in life?
6. Read 1 Peter 1:8-9. What can you do to make sure the joy of God shines through you? Why do you think it is important that others see this joy in us?
7. Read Isaiah 66:19-21 and Acts 1:8. Clearly we are sent on mission. What would it look like for your community group to live on mission together? Is there something you can do together to bless others in light of the coming Christmas season?



Taking It Home

8. What is one thing you are taking with you from your discussion?
9. In light of what you talked about, what could be a focus for prayer this coming week?