

26 June 2022 Isaiah 55:6-11

Augsburg Confession / 150th of Bethlehem; Pastor Fraser Pearce

An empty house is just a house.
But when a family moves in, it becomes a home.

Today we are celebrating the 150th anniversary
Of this Bethlehem Lutheran church building.
We're also celebrating the commemoration of the Presentation
Of the Augsburg Confession:
Of that confession of faith that is peculiar to Lutheran Christians.
So let's start today, before we head into the Isaiah reading,
By going to the Augsburg Confession, and hearing what it has to say
About the church.

This is what we read in the seventh article: ***The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.***

First of all,
Did you notice that the church is not defined as the building?
So, although we can talk Bethlehem church being 150 years old,
According to our confession of faith,
The church, properly speaking, is the Christian community,
And not the building in which the community meets.

But did you also notice that the church is physical, that it is tangible?
That it's not just an idea.
The church is the congregation of saints,
The gathering of God's flesh and blood baptised people,
In which the Good News about Jesus is taught
In accordance with the Scriptures,
And in which the Sacraments are administered
In accordance with Christ's institution.

So, although the church is not defined as a building,
It is defined in spatial terms, as something that can be seen,
As God's people gather,
As they gather to be baptised into the name of the Triune God,
As they hear the commands and promises of Christ taught faithfully,
And as they gather around the Lord's table,
To receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

So, you could say that, according to our confession of faith,
The relationship between the church and the church building,
Is like the relationship between the family and the family home.
Let's say a family builds a home,
They design it in a way that shows what they value,
And how they intend to live together.
The house is finished, and it's a house.
But the family moves in, and it becomes a home.
The family members furnish it
With things they find useful and beautiful,
And they share their life together
As they regularly gather together under the one roof.

Some families are fortunate enough to have the one house
Stay in the family over generations,
So that the building itself embodies the memories of the family,
And can even have a certain unifying power
Of being a place where the wider family can meet.

This is one way we can think about this Bethlehem church building:
It is the place where the Bethlehem church family
Has met over these last 150 years.
It was built by the Bethlehem church family - those 25 original families,
And our ancestors in the faith moved in.
And generation after generation God has gathered us together,
As God gathers us together today,
To hear his words, to receive his sacraments.

So, since we are gathered as the Bethlehem church family,
In this Bethlehem church home,

Let's hear God's word, let's hear the first words
From our Old Testament reading from Isaiah:

**Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;**

These words from Isaiah are spoken to people
Who have experienced the reality of exile,
Who have been robbed of their homes.
More than this, they had lost their king,
They had lost their temple.

But God was not far from them,
In language that reminds us Christians of the Sermon of the Mount,
The prophetic word calls people to seek the Lord
Because he has let himself be found,
The prophetic word commands people to call on the Lord,
Because he is right at hand to help.

As Christian people we know that the Lord is near,
Especially as we meet together in Jesus' name,
Because we have a temple that cannot be destroyed.
You may remember that Jesus said, '**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.**' John 2:19
We know that the temple that he was talking about was his body,
And that his body, the true temple of God,
Was raised up on the third day on that first Easter.
More than this, our Lord has promised us, '**Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.**' (Matthew 18:20).
There is the church, the family of God.

As Isaiah goes on we hear
That at the heart of the community that God creates
Is the gift of mercy and forgiveness. Listen:
**let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.**

As Christian people we know that the message of the Apostles
Is the message of repentance and of the forgiveness of sins

In Jesus' name: It's the message of turning back to God,
And trusting that for Jesus' sake our sins are forgiven,
Our debt is cancelled, our shame is covered.
In Isaiah the prophetic word is that God will have mercy,
That he will abundantly pardon.

Imagine that there is a grand amnesty of illegal firearms,
That anyone holding possession of them can hand them in,
With no questions asked, with no charges laid.
Normally going into a police station with a firearm,
Especially an illegal firearm, would be asking for trouble.
But when an amnesty is announced,
People can hand in the things they possess
For which they would normally be charged
And prosecuted and punished.
This is a picture of what God is like:
He is creating a community not based on vengeance
On bitterness, or the demand for only strict justice.
Rather he is creating a community that calls people together
By the promise of amnesty: of mercy, of abundant pardon.

This context can help us make sense of what comes next in Isaiah:

**For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are my ways your ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

These words can sometimes be quoted
In response to difficult theological questions,
Or even in response to harrowing pastoral questions
That can arise in the face of suffering.
But notice how in Isaiah they come up in the context
Of God's great mercy, and of his abundant pardon.
We human beings are not naturally merciful,
And we are not the kind of creatures that take joy
In abundantly pardoning.
Rather, it's natural for us to bear grudges, to wallow in self-pity,
And to demand our pound of flesh.
And we think that if there is a God, then he must be like this too,
But more so, with grudges and wrath on a divine scale.
But our way of thinking is not God's way of thinking,
And his thoughts are higher than our thoughts.
God gives us his word to free us from judging him by human standards.
As we hear the message of the cross of Christ, we see the great mercy
And abundant forgiveness of the God who created us,
Who sustains us in life, and who calls us to come close to him,
And to the brothers and sisters in the household of faith.

We can have confidence that God will achieve this among us
Not because we have such a great strength of faith or commitment
Or love for God, but because God's word is powerful.
Listen to how the Isaiah reading ends:

**For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.**

This is great imagery for this time of year in Adelaide,
Because we can see with our own eyes
What the prophetic word is describing.
In summer in Adelaide everything dries out,
We can look up at the hills and see that they are dry,
And that the country looks bereft of life.
But then come the autumn and the winter rains,
And everything turns green, and with spring
The trees and the fields burst into fruitful life.
God's word, the prophet says,
Is like the rain, like the snow that falls from the sky
And transforms the land, making it fruitful,
And giving the hope of new harvests,
And the joy of present feasting.
When we hear God's word, his word does its work among us,
Bringing us near as we trust in God's mercy and abundant pardon
In Christ Jesus,
And as learn to live together as brothers and sisters
In the one family of God.

Today is a special day for us at Bethlehem to give thanks to God.
We have been a congregation for over 160 years,
We have been people who, for over 160 years,
Have gathered together to hear Gospel rightly taught,
And to receive the sacraments rightly administered.
And for 150 years this house has been our home.
It speaks of what we value as a family:
With the lectern and the pulpit on either side of the church,
Places for the proclamation of the life-creating and sustaining
Word of God;
With the baptismal font at the front of the church,
Where we see new brothers and sisters
adopted into the family of God;
And with the central focus on the altar,
The place where we come week by week
To receive the mercy and the abundant pardon of God,
As we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in faith.
May God keep us in the Christian faith,
So that we may faithfully hand on what we have received,
And so that in our life together we may proclaim Christ,
And him crucified, to the glory of the Father. In Jesus' name. Amen.