
Welcome Home to Joy in God's House of Prayer for All People!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Homecoming Sunday – The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 15, Year A

Welcome home! It is the time of year to welcome each other back. Welcome back, Ted Lasso! Welcome home, Odysseus! There are so many who teach us the way back home.

Welcome home to those being baptized today!

(at 8:45): Alexander Walter Simon, Dawson Alexander Simon, Graham Mackenzie Simon, Bennett Hanson Simon!

(at 11:15): Monroe Mae Cohoes, Chapman Isabel Fuqua, Virginia Nell Houck, Craig Crane Perry III, Conrad Everett Vining, Robert Geoffrey Neville IV

(at 11:15 in Mikell Chapel): Keylen Yusleydi Bautista Peña, Galilea Barbis-Renteria, Adriel Barbis-Renteria !

Welcome back to the Cathedral, you who have been away this summer! Welcome back to the Cathedral, you who may have been away for a few years! Welcome to seekers who are at the Cathedral of St. Philip for the first time! It is time to be joyful! It is time to be joyful in God's house of prayer.

In the sixth century BC, a group of God's people were in exile, longing to return home. A prophet calling himself Isaiah proclaimed what that return to a rebuilt house would look like. He said of God's new house that "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." That image, "a house of prayer for all people," has become a welcoming and powerful description for our church today, the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip. We enjoy welcoming, and serving, and praying with, all sorts and conditions of God's people here.

Isaiah, in his new vision, described a new quality of God's renewed house of prayer. According to the prophet, it would not be a place that was closed, laden with the old stiff law and with sacrifices that did not serve the poor. It was to be a new place. A new Jerusalem, a new home. He said, "Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people'; and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.' (56:3). According to Isaiah, God says about the eunuchs and the foreigners, "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. (Isaiah 56:7).

So, the phrase, "A house of prayer for all people," is not a new slogan, or some sort of hip, new-age kind of thing to say. It is a description of our ancient tradition, the wide and welcoming tradition of healthy Christianity!

The prophet Isaiah had a vision of a new temple, a new assembly of God's people, that included not just the exiles of Israel, but also outsiders everywhere. Philip the deacon caught that vision, too, when he climbed up into the chariot to serve the Ethiopian eunuch, who was both a foreigner and one with a so-called blemish. This church, the Cathedral of St. Philip, is named for that very deacon.

We have welcomed and enjoyed the diversity of God's people here at the Cathedral. But there is another word from Isaiah's vision that I want to emphasize this year in our service and worship. It is the word, "joyful!" Isaiah said that God "will make them *joyful* in his house of prayer." I have experienced that!

It is fun, it gives us great joy, when we gather with the multitude of God's people: with insiders and outcasts, with those who have been here for generations, and with those who got here yesterday! A house of prayer for all people is for people in diapers, for people with patches, with blemishes, with canes; a house of prayer for all people!

God intends for us to be joyful in this house of prayer! And we are! This year we will also be living into a new room in our house of prayer, the Good Faith Chapel. Please visit the Good Faith Chapel. Please pray in that sacred space! The Good Faith Chapel is not named for a particular saint, nor is it named for a particular benefactor. It is named for people of good faith, no matter who they are or where they come from. It is named for people like the Canaanite woman in today's gospel, who probably has no chapel named for her. She pleaded with Jesus for mercy, and he did not answer her, said he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. But the Canaanite woman changed Jesus' mind when she reminded him that even the dogs eat crumbs from the table. "Great is your faith!" Jesus said to her.

The Good Faith Chapel is named for people of good faith like the Canaanite woman. It represents both the transcendence and the immanence of being joyful in God's house of prayer. What a glorious and uplifting space that is, a space for blessing. When we touch awe in that space, we touch joy. When we touch each other in that space, we touch joy.

To you who are being baptized today, to you who are friends and family of those being baptized, to us who are renewing our baptismal vows: we are not saying our baptismal vows in a place of the old law, a place of complaining and whining. Our church is not like that, not a place of complaining or scolding. That is the old law, the law that always sounded like a scolding schoolmaster or schoolmarm (see Paul's epistle to the Galatians!).

We live today in a new freedom, a new freedom in Christ, and in a new house of prayer, the one proclaimed by Isaiah so long ago! It is place where we are joyful in the community of so many people of good faith!

Join us in joy! It is time to come home to joy, even if you have never been here before. How wonderful it is to be part of a community that blesses people, that blesses all sorts of people. We do not condemn here; we bless! We do not scold here; we love! And thank you! Thank you to all who have been steadily serving and praying at home, preparing for a new year here. We are not only a house of prayer for all people. We are joyful in that house of prayer!

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip