August 24th

THE NEW SHOFAR

It is for us to see the Kingdom of God as always coming, always pressing in on the present, always big with possibility, and always inviting immediate action… ***Walter Rauschenbusch***

Kingdom love is what the Spirit builds

Isaiah 66:18-20. For I ***know*** their works and their thoughts, says Yahweh. What are ***their*** thoughts: idolatry, superstition, and other wickedness. The Hebrew word for *know* means that God has observed their works. Yahweh knows what is going on as he cares for all men and women, Jews and Gentiles alike (that is the liberating message of this part of Isaiah). And so, the time is coming when God gathers the entirety of his creation to himself. Those of his children Israel along with those who do not know him. He will carry out his judgment on those who persist in their sins but will bring salvation to the remainder. They will observe the glory of God – the full Truth of his love, mercy, power and faithfulness.

I will set a sign among them

The context of **Isaiah 66:19** is important for understanding its deep and profound meaning. Throughout the book of Isaiah, the prophet addresses the people of Israel, warning them of the consequences of their disobedience to God, but also offering them hope for redemption and restoration. In this final chapter, Isaiah speaks of a new Jerusalem, where God's glory will be revealed, and all nations will be gathered to worship Him. The verse signifies a turning point in the history of God's people, where those who have been scattered and lost will return to the worship of God and declare His glory among the Gentile nations.

The themes present in **Isaiah 66:19** are: hope, restoration, living grace and the worldwide celebration of God's glory. The **"sign"** that God sets among the nations is the living representation of His power and authority. The world will experience the fullness of God in and through the witness of the people of Israel themselves, but when that proves to be inadequate, the world will come to know God through the person and witness of his Son, Jesus. This is another word for "**salvation**", and the importance of what Isaiah is telling lies in the revelation that God's mercy will now include the Gentiles. The mention of specific nations, such as Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, signifies the widespread reach of God's message and the inclusion of diverse cultures and peoples in His plan for redemption.

I do not know where you are from.

"*Strive to enter in by the narrow door*", says Jesus. Elsewhere in the NT, Paul uses the same word to speak of athletic competition (**1 Cor. 9:25**), training intensively in Godliness (**1 Tim. 4:10**), and fighting the good fight (**1 Tim. 6:12;**

2 Tim. 4:7). Salvation is a gift of God. While it is a free gift, God expects disciples of his Son to approach discipleship in the way an athlete prepares for the Olympics. We need an athlete's discipline and determination in pursuing entrance through the narrow door. There are many choices that come our way, alternative roads to peace, temptations to find meaning in life in ways other than Kingdom ways. Many of these are seductive and lead people astray. They are impotent, unable to bring to fruition the kinds of things they promise.

What then does the image of a door say to us about the kingdom of God? Jesus' story about the door being shut to those who come too late suggests they had offended their host and deserved to be excluded. It is not an arbitrary rejection. It was customary for teachers in Jesus' time to close the door on tardy students and not allow them back for a whole week in order to teach them a lesson in discipline and faithfulness. Jesus told this story in response to the question of who will make it to heaven. Many rabbis held that all Israel would be saved, except for a few blatant sinners who excluded themselves! After all, they were specially chosen by God when he established a covenant with them.

Jesus does not directly answer the question, however; but his response is nonetheless unsettling on two counts. ***Firstly,*** Jesus surprised his listeners by saying that one's membership as a covenanted people does not automatically mean entry into the kingdom of God. ***Secondly,*** Jesus asserts that many from the gentile nations would enter God's kingdom. God's invitation is open to Jew and Gentile alike (taking up Isaiah's prophesy). But Jesus warns that we can be excluded if we do not ***strive*** *to enter by the narrow door*.

What did Jesus mean by this expression? The door which Jesus had in mind was himself: ***I am the door****; if anyone enters by me, they will be saved* (**John 10:9**). Through the cross Jesus opens the way for us to enter his kingdom. However, we must follow Jesus in the way of the cross. The word *strive* can also be translated *agony*. To enter the kingdom of God one must *struggle, go into battle against* the forces of temptation and whatever would hinder us from doing the will of God (apathy, indifference, fear and compromise).

Here is the Good News: **we do not struggle alone**. God is with us and his grace is sufficient! As we *strive side by side for the faith of the gospel* (Phil. 1:27) Jesus assures us of complete victory! It comes down to this question of faith: Do you trust in God's grace and help, especially in times of testing and temptation?

God established a saving relationship with us at the time of our baptism. In that sacrament he ordains us **to be his signs in the world**, his witnesses to all that God is offering to us, inviting us to share. He strengthens that relationship through the bread and wine of The Eucharist. The door to the Kingdom of heaven stands wide open and Christ Himself is the door. Believers let God remove their sins and their wrongful pride. Believers let God take away their self-righteousness. The door to the Kingdom stands wide open for all those who trust God and his Son Jesus Christ. We make it through that door only by the

grace and mercy of God, a grace that empowers us to be living witnesses to all the world can be.