

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
16 August 2026

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

The book of Isaiah is divided into three parts and has two (if not three) authors. The first part, which goes from chapters 1-39, takes place before the Babylonian exile and covers a long time: from the united monarchy to the Assyrian assimilation of the ten northern tribes, the siege of Jerusalem, and several decades before the Exile. The second part of the book, called the “Book of Comfort,” covers chapters 40-55, and takes place while the people of God are in Babylon. The third part of the book, chapters 56-66, takes place after the remnant of Israel has returned to the Promised Land. As such, each part of the book has a unique audience, a specific set of problems, and various divine answers to these problems.

The passage from Isaiah today corresponds to the very beginning of the third part of the book. These verses show great concern for three different issues: Sabbath obedience, the treatment of foreigners, and the incorporation of eunuchs into the liturgical life of the nation. Our passage gives us just verses 1 and 6 through 8. This is the section about the treatment of foreigners, and we are not given the section of the incorporation of the eunuchs. To understand this “blessing of the outcast” message, we need to speak about both groups.

The passage begins with a general call to maintain justice and to do what is right, in preparation for the upcoming salvation and liberation God promises the people. This liberation has to do with two promises: a full resettlement into the homeland and the return of God to dwell with his people. The promise of resettlement brings hope into the dispirited remnant. When they returned they found that many of their lands had been resettled by others called, “people of the land.” Conflicts arose almost immediately. This people had different traditions, religious practices, cultural feasts, and even their language and vocabulary seemed foreign to those who returned. To make matters worse, there was no Temple, no major infrastructure, no wall around the city, rudimentary farming, and a very unclear system of political organization. To resettle, they will have to build a wall, create a system of government, and begin a new building program.

The promise that soon God will return to dwell with his people has to do with the future building of a new temple. The temple of Solomon had been completely destroyed and it will take the newly arrived remnant several decades to build a new temple where the sacrificial system could be reinitiated. The key feature of the old temple was the Ark of the Covenant, which was believed to be

the spiritual residence of God within the temple. Once the new structure is built, God will return, which means that God will become the center of the liturgical and cultural life of the nation again. Until all of this resettlement and construction is completed, God orders the people to do several things: Obedience of the Sabbath, protection of the foreigner, and inclusion of the eunuchs in the life of Israel.

The passage visions that the Temple will be built on the holiest of mountains in Jerusalem, but Isaiah imagines substantive differences between the old and the new temples. Foreigners were not allowed in Solomon's temple, whereas the offerings and sacrifices of some foreigners will be accepted at the new temple. This is important to Isaiah because of what the prophet has heard from other prophets who blame the exile on the loose rules and lack of strict controls in the liturgy of the old temple. These prophets call for the removal of all foreigners from Israel, including foreign wives and children. Isaiah is concerned because many foreigners "joined themselves to the Lord" while in Babylon. They keep the Sabbath, they follow food rituals, they respect the festivals, and they keep the law. Isaiah disagrees with these prophets and makes it very clear that God considers these foreigners to be as good or even better than many of the children of Israel.

Now, let us talk about the eunuchs. By the time the nation goes into Babylon, the practice of creating eunuchs had disappeared in Israel. But when the Law was first given, hundreds of years before, there was a regulation against allowing these people from worshipping or gathering at the assemblies of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:1, Leviticus 21:18-20, 22:24). This mandate was then applied to the tent of meetings and the Temple of Solomon. The problem for Isaiah is that this practice was wildly used in other nations, including Babylon. Many Jewish boys had been castrated and placed at the service of the courts, the royal families, and the local temples. When the remnant returned, many of these eunuchs returned to the land of their ancestors. They follow the Law, obey Sabbath, respect food practices, and celebrate the festivals. Isaiah makes it clear that God will give these people, "in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

Lastly, let's talk about the Sabbath. In Israel's history, the Temple is the religious, liturgical, cultural, and even political center of the nation. It is the meeting place between God and humanity, the most sacred space in the entire land. Sacrifices can only happen at the temple. Grain and incense offerings happen at the temple. The witnessing of important treaties, the investiture of kings, the celebration of national holidays all happen at the temple. But the temple was destroyed decades before. All that remains is rubble on the place where it used to be and the memories of the elderly who remember childhood events at the site.

While in Babylon (and now in the homeland,) the Israelites turned to the Sabbath as the new central practice of their faith. The Sabbath does not need a building and can be practiced anywhere. Sabbath practices happen whatever devout Judeans happen to be. Isaiah makes it very clear that until the new temple is built, the Sabbath must remain central to the faith of Israel. It must be what unites families and communities, the new meeting place between God's people and their Lord.

This passage then opens a wonderful window into the community that returned to the Promised Land after exile. This is a community trying to do a forensic examination of the exile. Why did it happen? And how do we correct those problems from happening again? The question, therefore, among the exiles was how to regain Yahweh's favor, how to insure that God would never again bring judgments upon the chosen people. These are legitimate concerns, but God, through Isaiah, opposes how they go about ritual purity and obedience to the Law. God wants the inclusion of the marginalized, represented in this case by the eunuchs. God wants his people to welcome all foreigners, particularly all non-Israelites who joined themselves to God in Babilon and have kept the covenant. They are no longer separate but part of the family.

The passage ends with a wonderful statement. "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." God gathers all outcast, as in the case of eunuchs and foreigners, but God intends to go beyond these two groups. God says in the last line, "I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." God has a heart full of love for all those on the margins, for those who fall between the cracks, for those considered by the pious Israelites of Second Temple Judaism (and by today's institutional Church) to be beyond acceptance.

Many in our world are also looking for a perfect body of believers, a perfect Church. Those who practice their rituals in according to perfect rules, who are attired in the right way, and who know exactly what lists of actions they must do to be saved. Believers who love in the right way and only the right people. Those who belong and deserve to belong. But God today reminds us that his Church is a house of prayer for all people, including those for whom the world has little value. God also reminds us that rather than blaming foreigners and the outcast for all of our troubles, we are called to welcome and include them.

This is a valuable lesson, not just for our Church but also for our world. May our Lord continue to bless you. Amen!