



# ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING

## SPECIAL OFFERINGS

### Adult Bible Study

—Written by Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer, associate professor of New Testament,  
Austin Theological Seminary

*For the Leader:* Before you begin, read these materials for yourself. Think of which parts you want to read aloud for your group, and which you would like others to read aloud or to themselves. Encourage every person to have a Bible in front of them and a notepad and writing utensil to doodle or jot down thoughts as they come up. You may decide to make copies of the study for each participant, or that a Bible and notepad are enough.

### **The Fast I Choose**

*Isaiah 58:1–7*

#### ***Session 1:***

#### Opening Prayer<sup>1</sup>

God of Grace, no one is beyond the reach of your love or outside your limitless mercy. Move us toward those places where the walls of the city are in shambles. Move us toward those the world despises and the people reject, so that we may venture to follow Christ and risk showing Christ's love. Stand with those who are outcast; strengthen them in peace; encourage them by your presence; prod us to advocate on their behalf in places that neither love nor want them. And use us and them to build on the cornerstone of Christ until differences are honored and respected and all people, together, give you glory. Amen.

#### The First Reading: listening from your particular place

Your first task is to listen to the scripture being read aloud. Listening is important, because these scriptures were not, first, intended to be read but to be heard.<sup>2</sup> I will ask you to read aloud or otherwise perform the scripture passage for each study at least three times in the study. Do not be surprised if you hear different things each time.

One way to read aloud the poetry of Isaiah is to divide the room into two groups; using any biblical text that shows Isaiah as poetry, have group one read the first half of each poetic couplet and

group two read the second half. So, for instance, group one would read the line “Shout out, do not hold back!” and group two would respond “Lift up your voice as a trumpet.”

### *Thinking about who we are*

Several of Isaiah’s images stand out for me as I read this text. Among them are rebellion, sinfulness, the oppression of workers by people of faith, physical violence exerted by people of faith, and issues of injustice, poverty, and homelessness.

1. What images stand out for you (they may be the same as or different from mine)? Where have you seen or heard these issues raised? What individual, family, or local community issues are raised by this passage? You may want to write these on newsprint, paper or a whiteboard to make them visible so that you can spark the ideas of others or refer back to them later.
  - a Take a minute of silent reflection around this question. Those who wish may want to write out their ideas or to use the materials for attentive play to represent what they want to say.
  - b Together, brainstorm aloud around these questions for a few minutes until all who wish to have had a chance to think and to speak. Write up what you have brainstormed so that it will inform the rest of your study.
2. Where in local, national, or international media or conversation have you seen or heard these issues raised? What national or international issues are raised by this passage? [Follow the same procedure as noted above under a. and b.]
3. As we will see below, this text is both poetic and prophetic. Who are the prophets of today, sacred or secular, and what is their message? Who are the poets of today and what is their message? Do we still have prophetic poets and poetic prophets today? Who are they and what is their message? [Follow the same procedure as noted above under a. and b.]
4. Does this passage sound familiar to you? Where have you heard it before? From whom? In what context? [Follow the same procedure as noted above under a. and b.]

### *The Second Reading: Ministry in West Africa*

For nearly 18 months, life ground to a halt in Liberia. The Ebola virus not only ravaged the people but robbed them of their ability to provide for their families. The deadly disease took away more than people’s health; businesses and schools closed, flights in and out of the country were

suspended, and for those inside the country, there was a sense of abandonment by the international community.

With whole communities under quarantine, access to food and emergency items became difficult in a part of the world where people have often struggled to have these basic needs met due to the impact of a years-long civil war that ended in 2007.

At that time, the ministries of One Great Hour of Sharing had joined with ecumenical partners to assist in rehabilitation and rebuilding efforts in the war-torn countries of Sierra Leone and Liberia. Work began in earnest, with ambitious goals of improving the food security and economic status of individuals, families, and communities, developing and strengthening community-based organizations, and developing the technical and management capabilities of the councils of churches.

Seven years later, the initiatives and efforts were paying off. More than 65 communities had received training and assistance that helped establish prosperous farms and microbusinesses. Women were trained in livelihood projects like beekeeping, raising livestock, and growing moringa trees. Through years of working together, the ministries of One Great Hour of Sharing, community groups, and the Liberia Council of Churches had developed a shared vision and bond. But in 2014, the height of the Ebola crisis threatened to take all of it away.

By God's grace, however, that did not happen. The impact of years of development work done in partnership resulted in resiliency for many of the communities. While still experiencing the crisis, they were better equipped to support themselves, even as quarantines made the work of international aid difficult. And through it all, the continued connection forged through the years provided support to community organizations and the Liberia Council of Churches.

Rev. Kortu Brown from the Council said, "During the Ebola crisis, we felt the ecumenical community abandoned us, especially in North America. But the Presbyterian Church (USA) stood by us and kept the line of communication open."

As the economy deteriorated and people fled the region, the Liberia Council of Churches stayed to pray with families and seek help for those in need, especially the estimated 25 thousand children left orphaned by the virus and further abandoned by their communities.

"People are afraid of the children and don't want to be near them, even though the disease is now gone," said Brown. "This will be a long road to recovery for the children." Helping these children has been especially important to the Liberian Council of Churches, and supporting the Council's efforts as well as recovery of the economic and development work begun in 2007 has been central to the continuing partnership and support through One Great Hour of Sharing. While facing these

new challenges, the work continues, sure in the promise of continued partnership and shared faith.

*Your gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing support strong, compassionate, and resilient partnerships with communities experiencing hunger, poverty, disaster and injustice all over the world. Your generous and consistent support has brought gifts of sustainable development and food security. The impact has been communities resilient in the face of the most difficult circumstances and the knowledge that, in their time of great crisis and abandonment, the most important gift of your presence and commitment does not go away*

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. How does what you have heard or read agree or disagree with what you have previously heard about the situation in West Africa, before and after the Ebola crisis?
2. How long do crises like the civil wars in West Africa that ended in 2007 or the Ebola crisis which peaked in 2015 remain in the memories of those of us in the United States?
3. How does what you have heard or read affect the way you Isaiah 58:1-7?

Add your answers to these questions to your written collection of community reactions to the text.

### **Scripture in Context:**

To read Isaiah 58 in its own context, we must begin with a history of exile. What had been one kingdom under David and Solomon had split into two after Solomon's death, approximately 927 BCE<sup>3</sup>: a northern kingdom called Israel and a southern kingdom called Judah. These, in turn, had been conquered by larger empires to their east: the north by the Assyrian empire in 722 BCE, and the south by the Babylonian empire in 587 BCE.<sup>4</sup> The Babylonian conquest would last no more than four decades; Cyrus II of what would become the Persian empire, succeeded in defeating the Babylonians in 539 BCE.<sup>5</sup> A year after his victory, Cyrus, allowed the exiled people of Judea to return to Judah and to begin the tedious process of rebuilding the walls of the city of Jerusalem and its temple.<sup>6</sup>

The words of Isaiah 58, then, emerge out of a time of rebuilding and transition after catastrophe, war, and exile: a time in which there are power struggles over the temple, over the worship of the people, even over who would be included among the people of God.<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 56-66, sometimes called "third Isaiah" or "Trito-Isaiah," speaks directly to this period of social upheaval.<sup>8</sup> The dating of third Isaiah is tricky, because there are very few clues in the text. Some date its writings earlier than the rebuilding of the temple, which was finished in 515 BCE.<sup>9</sup> More recently, at least one

scholar has made the argument that the writings of the third Isaiah represent one side of an argument about the nature of life after exile.<sup>10</sup> This group would have been writing in critical response to some of the religious decisions of the period just before and including the coming of Ezra; if this is so, third Isaiah would be dated between 458 and 445 BCE.<sup>11</sup>

Differences in dating, however, do not change life on the ground for the people hearing Isaiah 58. For them, they were not a free people, but a subject people—subjects, first, of a temple system—whether in the process of being rebuilt or already rebuilt—that requires significant financial support from the people of Judah in the form of temple taxes and sacrificial offerings;<sup>12</sup> this in addition to being subjects of an empire that, without doubt, required unwavering loyalty and extreme amounts of financial tribute. Thus, life was difficult for some and dire for others. The oppression, hunger, nakedness, and homelessness in Isaiah 58, if hyperbolic, still probably speak to the realities on the ground: that life for those who returned to the city was far more difficult than it had been even under the rule of the Persian Empire.<sup>13</sup>

Within third Isaiah, Isaiah 58 comes relatively early, and it seems to change the subject. The anonymous prophet<sup>14</sup> begins chapter 56 with a command to remain loyal and a vision of what the future will be. In the imagined future, even two of the most unclean groups according to the law—eunuchs and foreigners—will be welcome in the worshiping community.<sup>15</sup> Chapter 57 turns, in sharp rebuke, against those whom the writer calls “children of a sorceress”; it is a charge of “idolatry and religious disloyalty . . . to Yahweh.”<sup>16</sup> This is followed by the rebukes and charges of chapters 58–59 to the believing community, the community that is at once faithful to God and unfaithful toward one another. All of this leads to the great visionary chapters at the heart of third Isaiah, so beloved equally by Jews and by Christians who through their own scriptures have appropriated these texts to themselves: chapters 60–62. It is here, after the sermonic tones of chapter 58, that we hear the command to “Arise, shine, for your light has come,” and the declaration that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”<sup>17</sup> The themes at the beginning of third Isaiah then repeat themselves as the eleven-chapter section draws to a close. The anonymous prophet ends with the ultimate reason to “maintain justice: the promise of eschatological hope for those on the side of the community’s arguments and the threat of eschatological judgment for its enemies.”<sup>18</sup>

### *For discussion*

1. Does this overview of the history and context of third Isaiah change the way you hear this text in your own context? In the context of responses to civil war and illness?
2. What other questions does this overview raise? How might you go about getting those questions answered?

## A Closer Look: Isaiah 58 1–7

Given what we now know, and sitting with all the voices that we have invoked—those from within our own context and those from others—let us take time to read this passage more carefully.

### *Verse 1*

The chapter begins with the command to call out, literally, “with the throat,” to lift up one’s voice like a shofar, the traditional ram’s-horn trumpet of ancient Israel and Judah.<sup>19</sup> The biblical witness is that the call of the trumpet is frequently a call of alarm, signaling an approaching danger or a call to fasting.<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 25 calls for the blowing of the trumpet on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the only day of fasting on the pre-exilic calendar of the people of Judah. In Isaiah 58, the trumpet announces rebellion and sin in the “House of Jacob,” a metaphor for the post-exilic worshippers of Yahweh living in Judah.

### *Verse 2*

What should be immediately striking is that the problem is not one of piety. These are, in fact, people who seek God “day after day” and “delight” to know God’s ways and to draw near to God. Yet, the prophet charges, they are not a nation that practices righteousness—or perhaps even more accurately, justice.<sup>21</sup> The prophet charges that, even as they seek after God, these people have forsaken the just/righteous judgments or ordinances of God.

### *Verses 3–4*

Here we find out that the particular form of piety being practiced is fasting. And with it, we begin to understand the people’s complaint.

The common perception was, and is, that religious activities such as fasting are designed to have beneficial results for their practitioners. The miserable social conditions obtaining during the first century of Persian rule, to which several biblical texts attest suggest that this was not happening.<sup>22</sup>

God, it seems, “does not notice” the faithful piety of God’s people, despite the ways in which the people humble their very beings.<sup>23</sup> The response is neither that one ought not to fast at all, nor that there should be no personal benefit from fasting. Rather, the prophet takes the opportunity to point out two matters. First, the fast is not about the desires of God, but rather about what “delights” the people, for the same root word used to translate “delights” in verse 2 returns here disguised as “your own interests.” In short, the prophet charges, you “delight” in drawing near to God, and even humble yourself in fasting; but this is only so that you can continue to do what delights you, regardless of what delights God.

Second, the prophet begins to point out the social conditions that the people allow and foster, even in the midst of their fasting: the oppression of all workers; the abuse of persons “with a wicked fist”; quarreling, fighting, and the like. Fasting that does not do something about the social conditions in which the fast takes place, he argues, will receive no divine attention.

### Verses 5–7

Verse five returns to the original premise of the complaint that the people raise against God: that they have humbled their very beings, and God has not listened to them. The prophet raises the necessary question: is the fast that you describe—a humbling of the being—even one in sackcloth and ashes—is this the fast that God desires? And, rather than answering directly, the prophet suggests that there might be an alternative form of piety to which the people are not attending: a form of piety based on social justice (or social righteousness) rather than on personal piety.<sup>24</sup> Those who practice this sort of piety will undo yokes from the necks of workers; free people bound by injustice; feed the hungry; clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless. Instead of complaining that God does not see, those who practice this kind of piety will practice seeing—and acting on what they see; and they will not hide themselves away from their own flesh and blood. Such a fast requires getting up from the sackcloth, and rethinking what we mean by worship, if we are to participate in what God, speaking through the prophet, calls “the fast that I choose.”

### Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think is the connection between the prophet’s call to charge the people with rebellion and the kind of fasting that is not being done?
2. What about this passage disturbs you? Delights you? Puzzles you? Makes you think? What other questions do you have, and how will you go about getting them answered?

### Making Connections:

At this stage, you have had a lot to ponder. This is a chance to begin to integrate some of what has been presented, as well as to think further about what more you would like to do around the issues raised in prior discussion. I invite you into a discussion around these related questions:

1. In what ways does Isaiah 58:1–7 address the issues that you brainstormed together as part of your group process? What reaction do you have to the way the prophet addresses the issues? Given your work on this text, what appropriate responses might you make? To the text? To local issues? What other thoughts do you have or what other tangents would you like to explore?
2. In what ways does Isaiah 58:1–7 speak to the ministry of One Great Hour of Sharing in West Africa? Given your work on the text, what are appropriate responses—if any—of your community to the issues raised?
3. If we were to take Isaiah 58 seriously, what would be different about:
  - a. Our life of the spirit: worship, prayer, meditation, and other spiritual disciplines?
  - b. Our life of the mind: study, discussion, thought, theology and other mental disciplines?
  - c. Our life of the body: actions, mission, care of self and of other persons’ beings?

### A Time of Closing

Take time to pray together, silently or aloud, for those concerns that have surfaced because of this study.

## Suggestions for continuing the conversation

If this study has sparked a need to continue this conversation or to broaden it, consider some of the following options:

- Gather poets and creative writers to write hymns, prayers, and litanies for a people returning from exile based on the writings in third Isaiah.
- Gather visual artists and web-savvy persons to create visual displays based on Isaiah 58:1–7, and/or visual displays about the Ebola crisis for prayerful use in your congregation.
- Gather dancers and actors to create liturgical dances or acted ministries of the word for use within your congregation.
- Find out who in your community is working to care for orphaned children and inquire how best the church can be of assistance.
- Plan an “Isaiah 58 church-wide fast” in which, instead of giving up food, members of the church set up work teams to spend a day feeding the hungry, advocating on behalf of workers, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, and doing peacemaking workshops.
- Invite a speaker who is involved in a specialized pastoral ministry: for example, a military, hospital, or prison chaplain, or a therapist who specializes in pastoral care.
- Organize a “pastoral caregivers’ Sabbath” for your pastor, your church staff, and any other persons who are involved in ministries of pastoral care; include among them persons doing pastoral work in seminary- and college-related settings.



# ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING SPECIAL OFFERINGS

## Adult Bible Study

—Written by Rev. Dr. Margaret Aymer, associate professor of New Testament,  
Austin Theological Seminary

### **Repairers of the Breach**

*Isaiah 58:8–14*

#### **Session 2:**

#### Opening Prayer<sup>25</sup>

Lord Jesus Christ, by your human life, involve your church again in the common life of all people. By your service to women and men, commit your church again to work for every form of human well-being. By your suffering, make your church sensitive once more to all human suffering, so that we may see your face in the faces of persons in every kind of need. By your crucifixion, disclose to your church God's judgment on the inhumanity that marks human relations and the awful consequences of our complicity in injustice. In the power of your resurrection and the hope of your coming, reveal again to your church the promise of your renewal of human life in society and your victory over all wrong. Send us into the world as your reconciling community. And help us follow your pattern in our life and in our action. For, in so doing, we confess that you are indeed Lord. Amen.

#### The First Reading: listening from your particular place

You may again wish to divide the room into two groups. Have group one read or sign the first half of each poetic couplet and group two read the second half. You may find this feels different, perhaps less awkward, than at the first study. Alternatively, you may choose to have one narrator read the text and have two groups move in ways that interpret the reading. Be creative!

#### *Thinking about who we are*

This section of Isaiah presents new images. Here I see the images of light, glory, vindication, food, need, and Sabbath. It feels very different to me from the first part of this chapter.

1. What images stand out for you (they may be the same as or different from mine)? Where in your individual or collective lives have you seen or heard these issues raised? What

individual, family, or local community issues are raised by this passage?

- a. Take a minute of silent reflection around this question. Those who wish may want to write out their ideas or use the materials for attentive play to represent what they want to say.
  - b. Together brainstorm aloud around these questions for a few minutes until all who wish to have had a chance to think and to speak. Write up what you have brainstormed so that it will inform the rest of your study.
2. Where in local, national, or international media or conversation have you seen or heard these issues raised? What national or international issues are raised by this passage? [Follow the same procedure as noted above under a. and b.]
  3. As we will see below, this text is both poetic and prophetic. Who are the prophets of today, sacred or secular, and what is their message? Who are the poets of today and what is their message? Do we still have prophetic poets and poetic prophets today? Who are they and what is their message? [Follow the same procedure as noted above under a. and b.]
  4. Does this passage sound familiar to you? Where have you heard it before? From whom? In what context? [Follow the same procedure as noted above under a. and b.]

### The Second Reading: Mending Broken Walls in Syria

In 2012, civil war broke out in Syria. The violence and destruction have continued as the presence of ISIL results in more violence and fear. More than 250,000 people have been killed and 13.5 million others have been forced to leave their homes and seek safety in Lebanon, Europe, and the United States.

Since then, images of those trapped in Aleppo or injured and fleeing the violence have captivated the hearts and compassion of many. At the same time, fear of those fleeing as refugees has sparked prominent leaders in parts of Europe and the United States to question the wisdom of welcoming these strangers.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has remained steadfast in its aid and support to refugees in many ways throughout the crisis. Soon after it began, thanks to gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA) worked to provide food and emergency aid to those displaced. As the refugee camps grew and remained over years, efforts had to be expanded. Working with churches in the region, PDA helps Syrian refugee children living in Lebanon continue their education and provides refugee families food, shelter, and heating oil.

As refugees seek safe haven in the United States, PDA has assisted congregations responding to the Biblical imperative to welcome the stranger and the immigrant.

In addition to the physical assistance, emotional and spiritual support have not been neglected. Trainings for pastors at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut have provided vital support to pastors and church leaders.

“(The church) has ongoing projects with the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon and the Iraq church, and I was grateful to be a part of this training,” said Rev. Dr. Laurie Kraus, director of PDA. “I wanted to reconnect with the pastors that are working in disaster relief and war response.”

During a five-day training, in August of 2015, pastors and church officials shared stories of how they had personally witnessed the destruction of churches and homes and how a number of strangers have become like family as they sought refuge from ISIL.

“These churches want us to focus on the needs of those most vulnerable during this crisis, but we can’t ignore the churches themselves and the incredible cost churches and their leaders are paying with their own lives, their families, and spirituality,” said Kraus. “Ministers have to wrestle with deep questions of God’s presence and absence and the ways these kinds of circumstances change and impact faith. I was moved to tears day after day by the power of their witness and incredible willingness to stay faithful amidst the chaos while continuing to serve others.”

While many have been forced to flee, most Syrians long to return to their country and the only place they have called home. With support through One Great Hour of Sharing, PDA and the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon have allowed some families to do just that.

In Homs, Syria, more than 40 houses and apartments have been rebuilt. This project allows families to begin the long process of building new lives.

Remarking on the experience of one displaced couple, an engineer and pediatrician whose apartment was rebuilt, Kraus says, “Their block is dark at night. There is no one else in their building or on their street. The wife goes out at 3:00 in the morning to make house calls on children. They’re living like pioneers at a frontier outpost. They are living there because they believe it’s the only way to bring back their city.”

Our gifts to One Great Hour of Sharing played a part in bringing hope to these Syrian families displaced or remaining amid violence. With continued support, more homes will be rebuilt, and the streets of that dark city block will again be filled with people living in peace. Support will continue for students to receive an education while living in the camps, and congregations will continue to offer hospitality to Syrian families who reach our shores.

### Questions to Consider:

1. How does what you have heard or read agree or disagree with what you have previously heard about the situation in Syria?
2. How does what you have heard or read affect the way you hear Isaiah 58:1–7?

### Scripture in Context

Isaiah 58:8–14 is the second half of the chapter. A fuller description of this history is found in Study 1—“Is this the fast that I choose?” However, some key points bear repeating for the sake of this study. Third or Trito-Isaiah is written from the perspective of some of those who returned to Jerusalem from exile under first the Babylonian and then the Persian empires. They came with great expectations but were faced with the realities of famine, heavy taxation, and a struggle for power among the religious elite. In the face of these, the writings of Trito-Isaiah called the people to maintain justice in the hope of a promised eschatological future in which even those whom the scriptures call unclean will be accepted into the holy community.

The first half of this chapter centers around two rhetorical questions: “Is this fast I choose?” and “Is this *not* the fast I choose?” Under the first set of questions lies the indictment that the observable piety of the people of God was being accompanied by the oppression of workers and others under the yoke. The second set of questions functions as a call to the just worship of God. Such worship requires the people of God to free the oppressed, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and be present for one another in the face of great hardships. The passage that we study today suggests how the lives of God’s people will be changed if they take the two-question rebuke seriously.

### A Closer Look: Isaiah 58:8–14

#### Verse 8–9a

The challenge to the faith community in verses 6–7 was to undo injustice, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless and clothe the naked. Having called the people to action, the prophetic poet, using the simple transition “then,” paints a picture of the future of the community that follows his directives. On such a community, light bursts like a wineskin shattering, or like the brilliance that floods the morning the instant the sun crests the horizon. Healing comes more quickly, perhaps, than people imagine. The very righteousness or justice that seems to be missing in 58:2 now walks before the community of faith.<sup>26</sup> And the full weight of the glory of God (for glory is a weighty matter in Hebrew) stands behind the community. Even more joyfully, God will respond to the call of the people, indeed will be present among them. All of this, the prophet exhorts, comes solely for observing what Jesus would later command: to care for “the least of these.”

#### Verse 9b–10

“If . . .,” begins the prophet, and some of us wince. These verses are uncomfortably conditional for Reformed persons who hold closely to salvation by faith and not by works. But the prophet warns

us that grace may be cheap, but one must still respond to it. And it is in its response that the community of faith is illumined by God. The response, exhorts the prophet, rests less on our “fasting” than on our treatment of one another. It rests on our breaking every oppressive yoke, watching over our speech and our finger-pointing, and on giving not only our food but our very beings to those whose beings are hungry and afflicted. How we respond to the questions in Isaiah 58:6–7—“Is this not the fast that I choose?”—affects our clarity, our sense of the light and presence of God in the midst of the gloom of exile, famine, and the hard work of rebuilding.

### *Verses 11–12*

And the promise, for those who respond to the prophet’s exhortation, is threefold. First, the promise is of the presence and provision of the God of heaven and earth. It is not, mind you, a promise of wealth or of material prosperity; rather it is a promise of provision in times of struggle. It is a promise of strength in a time of fragility. It is a promise of clean, pure water—rather than the stagnant floods of 2005—water that refreshes and restores and brings forth life. And second, the promise is one of reconstruction; at a time of destruction of wall and temple, the prophet claims for the people of God the reconstruction of the city that they love so much. This is a promise of a home for a people who have been living as exiles for generations; it is a promise of a place of their own for a people who truly have been “nobodies” under imperial rule. And the third promise is that of a name: the repairer, the restorer, the one who mends what is broken and brings what has been damaged to new life. If you want to rebuild the walls, argues third Isaiah, you must begin by rebuilding the people; for from that rebuilding you will discover the provision of God, a home in the midst of exile, and a new name—the name “repairer of the breach.”

### *Verses 13–14*

At first, these two verses seem anticlimactic. After all, the prophet has just exhorted us to rebuild the people; why now talk about Sabbath? For the prophet is very clear: just as we are to take back, or restore the streets, so also are we to take back our feet from trampling the Sabbath. But, in fact, these last two verses refer back to the beginning of chapter 58; they refer back to fast days, holy days, days of rest, in which people were pursuing their own desires or, as NRSV translates it, “pursuing their own interests.” But the prophet counsels us, in a word closely related to that weighty word “glory,” to honor the Sabbath; that is, to give weight to the Sabbath. Let the Sabbath be weighty, set aside, a time of delight, says the prophet; for one day, let go of going after what you want and just delight in God. And let your neighbors, your workers, those of your community, let everyone do so as well. For Sabbath allows for the mending of beings and the healing of frazzled, tired bodies busily rebuilding a broken city. Take Sabbath, says the prophet, and let God feed you, bear you up, and restore your heritage. There is a wisdom to this, a wisdom to realizing, again, that God is still sovereign, in the midst of the broken city. And despite the name given to us, it is God who is the repairer of our breaches; it is God who restores our way. The poetic prophecy ends, and we are left with Sabbath, as with a deep, restorative breath. For, says the prophet, the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think is the connection between the prophet's call to charge the people with rebellion and the kind of fasting that is not being done?
2. What about this passage disturbs you? Delights you? Puzzles you? Makes you think? What other questions do you have, and how will you go about getting them answered?

### Making Connections

Here again, as in every Bible study, I invite you to connect all that you have read and discussed, all the joys and sorrows that you have invoked, in a wider discussion. The questions remain the same, but hopefully, the answers will differ and deepen:

1. In what ways does Isaiah 58:1–7 address the issues that you brainstormed together as part of your group process? What reaction do you have to the way the prophet addresses the issues? Given your work on this text, what appropriate responses might you make? To the text? To local issues? What other thoughts do you have, or what other tangents would you like to explore?
2. In what ways does Isaiah 58:1–7 speak to the ministry of One Great Hour of Sharing among refugees? Given your work on the text, what are appropriate responses—if any—of your community to the issues raised?
3. If we were to take Isaiah 58 seriously, what would be different about:
  - a. Our life of the spirit: worship, prayer, meditation, and other spiritual disciplines?
  - b. Our life of the mind: study, discussion, thought, theology, and other mental disciplines?
  - c. Our life of the body: actions, mission, care of self and of other persons' beings?

### A Time of Closing

Take time to pray together, silently or aloud, for those concerns that have surfaced because of this study.

### Suggestions for continuing the conversation

If this study has sparked a need to continue this conversation or to broaden it, consider some of the following options:

- Gather poets and creative writers to write hymns, prayers, and litanies about the rebuilding of people, the restoration of hope, the repairing of breaches, and the rest of Sabbath.

- Gather visual artists and web-savvy persons to create visual displays based on Isaiah 58:8–14 and the inbreaking of light; they may want to find ways to connect that to the rebuilding in Homs, Syria.
- Gather dancers and actors to create liturgical dances or acted ministries of the word for use within your congregation based on Isaiah 58.
- Plan an “Isaiah 58 church-wide or community-wide Sabbath” in which the church honors those who work while others rest, or whose work makes it possible for others to rest. Be sure to include law enforcement, custodial workers, kitchen workers (especially in hotels), and other such staff.
- Contact PDA and find out how you can aid in refugee resettlement efforts.
- Take up an additional collection, or do a fundraiser (yes, you can do a lemonade stand) for One Great Hour of Sharing!
- Gather a work team and contact PDA to assist with ongoing disaster response work in the US.
- What are the breaches in your home town? Of what does your church feel called to be the repairer and restorer? Who are those whose beings need care, feeding, housing? Create a Sabbath of service and celebration that includes rest, repair, and rejoicing for your community.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “For the Outcast,” in *Book of Common Worship: Daily Prayer* by the Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 452.

<sup>2</sup> Most ancient world persons were illiterate, so only the elite could *read* the scriptures. To hear the scriptures begins to capture how these texts might have been used in their day. If you have among you, persons who are hearing impaired or deaf, you may choose to sign one half of each couplet, so that the text may be *seen* as well as heard.

<sup>3</sup> I will follow the common practice within the academy of using BCE (before the common era) and CE (the common era) for the formerly used BC (before Christ) and AD (*Anno Domini*). Michael Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1984), 111.

<sup>4</sup> Grant, 120, 142.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays, *et al.* (Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 185; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, ed. G. Ernest Wright, *et al.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 295.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 48.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah is commonly held to be a tripartite book: Isaiah (1-39), Deutero- or Second Isaiah (40-55), and Trito- or Third Isaiah (56-66). For a full explication and examination of Bernhard Duhm’s 1892 hypothesis of the presence of Trito-Isaiah, see Blenkinsopp, 237-37.

<sup>9</sup> Westermann, 186.

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 66:2, 5; Blenkinsopp calls this group “the tremblers”—the ones who tremble at God’s word. Blenkinsopp, 51. Walter Brueggeman also acknowledges the argument in the text, although he does not name the disputants as “the tremblers.” Walter Brueggeman, *Isaiah*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 165.

<sup>11</sup> Blenkinsopp, 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 58:6-7.

<sup>14</sup> The actual prophet Isaiah probably lived in the 700s BCE.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 56.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggeman, 177.

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<sup>17</sup> Isaiah 60:1; 61:1.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 66:18-24

<sup>19</sup> The Jewish Publication Society translates this “Cry out with full throat.”

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Jeremiah 4:5; Joel 2:15.

<sup>21</sup> Although justice and righteousness often mean different things in English, they are strong synonyms both in Hebrew and in Greek. The danger with the translation “righteousness” is that we Westerners have an unconscious tendency to insert the word “personal” in front of righteousness; thus, we make righteousness a matter of personal piety, which is exactly *not* what the prophet is calling the faithful to do in this text.

<sup>22</sup> Blenkinsopp, 177.

<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew, here, suggests a humbling of one’s “being-ness”—that which collectively constitutes one’s intelligence and soul, and strength. It is more than an outward appearance of humbling; the plaintiffs in this matter are genuinely involving their entire beings in the pious worship of God.

<sup>24</sup> This will likely grate against some of our good Reformed sensibilities that warn us against “works righteousness.” Yet, the Bible is replete with the counter-testimony that, in the words of James, “faith without works is dead.”

<sup>25</sup> Adapted from Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) “The Confession of 1967: Inclusive Language Text,” (Louisville, KY, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 2002) 9.31-9.33.

<sup>26</sup> In the context of Isaiah 58, “righteousness” or “justice” makes more sense here than “vindicator” or “vindication” because the reuse of the word in English signals the poet’s reuse of the word in Hebrew. This is, after all, one chapter, and the indictments in the first section are directly connected to the exhortations in the second section.