

Our Hebrew scripture comes from the prophetic book called Isaiah. Listen with me for God's word to us from chapter 58 (CEB):

- Shout loudly; don't hold back;  
raise your voice like a trumpet!  
Announce to my people their crime,  
to the house of Jacob their sins.
- <sup>2</sup> They seek me day after day,  
desiring knowledge of my ways  
like a nation that acted righteously,  
that didn't abandon their God.  
They ask me for righteous judgments,  
wanting to be close to God.
- <sup>3</sup> "Why do we fast and you don't see;  
why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?"  
Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want,  
and oppress all your workers.
- <sup>4</sup> You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast;  
you hit each other violently with your fists.  
You shouldn't fast as you are doing today  
if you want to make your voice heard on high.
- <sup>5</sup> Is this the kind of fast I choose,  
a day of self-affliction,  
of bending one's head like a reed  
and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes?  
Is this what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the Lord?
- <sup>6</sup> Isn't this the fast I choose:  
releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke,  
setting free the mistreated,  
and breaking every yoke?
- <sup>7</sup> Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry  
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,  
covering the naked when you see them,  
and not hiding from your own family?
- <sup>8</sup> Then your light will break out like the dawn,  
and you will be healed quickly.  
Your own righteousness will walk before you,  
and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard.
- <sup>9</sup> Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;  
you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here."
- If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;
- <sup>10</sup> if you open your heart to the hungry,  
and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,  
your light will shine in the darkness,  
and your gloom will be like the noon.
- <sup>11</sup> The Lord will guide you continually  
and provide for you, even in parched places.

God will rescue your bones.  
 You will be like a watered garden,  
 like a spring of water that won't run dry.  
<sup>12</sup> They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account;  
 the foundations of generations past you will restore.  
 You will be called Mender of Broken Walls,  
 Restorer of Livable Streets.

If you're feeling a bit of *déjà vu*, it's maybe because this season the prophetic power of Isaiah keeps coming to us. It also could be because in August 2022, the first time I preached from this pulpit, our text was from Isaiah chapter 58.

Back then this church was emerging from Covid precautions. And struggling in the aftermath of some fraught staffing transitions. As the newest pastoral staff member I encountered a community that seemed collectively tender. People felt a little beaten up, sometimes by each other. I heard a wide array of stories. And it became clear we had choices: to do the hard work of understanding each other's experiences and convictions, or to fall out into irreconcilable camps and let the witness of Christ's people be etched away.

So in late summer 2022 we heard Isaiah 58 call us to be changed so that we'd be ready to thrive in God's transformative love. In that season the if...then challenge of this text really stood out to me:

*If* you remove the yoke from among you,  
 the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;  
*if* you open your heart to the hungry,  
 and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,  
 [*then*] your light will shine in the darkness,  
 and your gloom will be like the noon.

It turns out, friends, that a great many Highland folks were hungry for divine healing and human reconciliation. Three and a half years later, a lot of broken hearts have been tended and mended. We're better at confessing our failures. We're learning to communicate more directly about our differences and our hopes. In worship and in fellowship and in mission and in stewardship, this faith community genuinely yearns to convey the Holy Spirit's warmth and welcome. I hope that as Christ's people on this corner, we do shine a little light into God's world.

So thank God that in 2026 we can hear Isaiah 58 with fresh ears. Yes, we need to keep treating each other righteously if we are to take delight in God. But ceasing our infighting isn't enough. Because there's more here.

These later chapters of Isaiah reflect Israel's experience returning after the trauma of exile in Babylon. While they try to rebuild, some better-off Israelites are exploiting poor laborers. So these verses challenge the people to stop going performing religious practices if they're not willing to put their money where their mouth is. And I do mean money because the command to practice economic justice rings repeatedly through this chapter.

To fast is to choose not to eat for a time, as a spiritual or symbolic practice. Regarding fasting, here are a few startling sentences from Reformation-era theologian John Calvin:

Not only do many people fast in order to atone for their cheating and robberies, and to plunder more freely, but even that, during the time of the fast, they may have greater leisure

for examining their accounts, perusing documents, and calculating [interest], and contriving methods by which they may lay hold on the property of their debtors.<sup>1</sup>

Ouch! Okay, so don't fast to spend your mealtimes exploiting other people.

Of course there are faithful ways to fast, too — versions of fasting that strengthen God's people, reduce injustice, and turn our compassion toward the afflicted. We're going to practice a tiny fast this morning.

Sana Abhari is the Legal Director at Kentucky Refugee Ministries. Some of you know her, and one of our members had the pleasure of helping Sana learn English when she arrived here some 25 years ago as a refugee from Iran. She was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Now she's an accomplished practicing attorney.

And Sana has watched in horror this year as protesters in her home country, asking for basic economic justice and judicial process, have been mass murdered by state security forces. Despite the regime's media blackout, thousands of deaths have been confirmed. Multiple sources estimate that the total death toll could be as high as 30-40,000. How could you and I ever be of help from here?

Sana does ask something of us. She writes:

Across faith traditions, honoring the deceased and acknowledging collective grief are powerful acts of compassion and solidarity. The Iranians inside Iran and the Iranian diaspora are hurting. A moment of silence — however short — can serve as a meaningful gesture of humanity, allowing individuals to reflect, pray, or hold space for those who have died, and for the families and communities who continue to mourn them.<sup>2</sup>

So standing with Sana, and honoring thousands of God's people who have been murdered in Iran, I invite us all briefly to fast from words. Please join me in one minute of prayerful stillness.

*one minute of silence*

While you and I have limited agency in affecting Iran, Isaiah calls the faithful to love all our neighbors by fasting from self-indulgence, fasting from injustice, fasting from cheap worship. Scholar Walter Brueggemann puts the prophet's call succinctly: "The God of Judaism is not a God who likes to be flattered in a more or less passive routine of worship; this God is out working the neighborhood, and wants all [worshippers] out doing the same."<sup>3</sup> In other words, communion with God *means* attentive neighborliness. Want to enjoy God? Love God's people.

Verse 6 tells us what *God* wants: release people from wicked restraints like paralyzing indebtedness; untie people from any yoke of servitude; set free the mistreated. Think about who in our society fits those categories — they are the neighbors whom God prioritizes.

What do these neighbors require of us? Verse 7 gets really blunt: shared bread, shared houses, shared clothing. And the text won't let us escape the needs of people who are "not our kin." In God we are *all* siblings. Period.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*. Quoted in Brueggemann, Walter. *Isaiah*. Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998. p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> From an email to faith leaders, January 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann. p. 189.

Sharing bread and houses and clothes could mean giving up some comfort for those of us who have everything we need. But I'm inspired by some of you who already model this. Recently two different Highland church folks, though their own lives are plenty complex, have said to me: "If a refugee family, or a queer person, needs a safe place to stay, my house is available."

Next Sunday the Rev. Dr. Angela Johnson will preach here at Highland, and we have the delight of hosting siblings in Christ from her congregation, Grace Hope Presbyterian in Smoketown. As Megan and I met with her to plan next Sunday's worship, Angela mentioned that she recently heard a convicting sermon on Isaiah 58, today's scripture, preached to a coalition of community organizers by Rabbi Sam Rose from Greenville, SC. I'm glad I got to go read it.

Because Rabbi Rose preaches that the Hebrew word for "bread" shares a linguistic root with the word for "war" or "struggle." So bread, from a Hebrew worldview, represents the struggle for existence. The rabbi goes on:

When Isaiah calls us to "break bread" with the poor, he isn't suggesting we merely perform an act of charity or hand out a simple meal. He is demanding that we enter into their struggle. To "break bread" is to break the barriers — the legal obstacles, the systemic perversions, the [unjust] laws — that block a human being from experiencing their own dignity. It is a call to dismantle the struggle itself.<sup>4</sup>

Rabbi Rose goes on to show that refugees and immigrants, vilified and dehumanized by many currently in power, must be our partners in breaking bread, and the people whose struggles we must dismantle.

Prophets are speaking in 2026 America, just as they did in ancient Israel and Judah. Prophets like Rabbi Sam Rose. Prophets like Father James Martin, who sounded a lot like Isaiah, and like Jesus, when he said in an interview this week:

[W]hile you might be interested in a particular church because of the community itself, which is where we find God, there also needs to be a connection with Jesus and [with] God. So it can't just be me and my community. Are you helping the poor? Are you living out what Jesus says, or is it just about going to [worship] and ticking the boxes? People go to church to get something — to get spiritual nourishment, to get reflections on the Gospels, to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist — which is fine, but it also does need to be about giving. Are [we] doing the hard work of Christianity?<sup>5</sup>

So may we be Christ's loving community with and for each other.  
May we break bread — and break barriers — with our immigrant neighbors.  
Through true worshipful work, may tangible hope radiate from the heart of the Highlands.

If you provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,  
your light will shine in the darkness....  
You will be called Menders of Broken Walls, Restorers of Livable Streets. (vv. 10, 12)

In the name of God the Voice,  
God the Word,  
and God the Listener.

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<sup>4</sup> From his sermon for community organizing leaders at Direct Action & Research Training Center, January 2026. Manuscript shared by an attendee.

<sup>5</sup> "Rev. James Martin on Our Moral Duty in Turbulent Times." Interview with Lulu Garcia-Navarro. *New York Times*. 3 February 2026.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/03/magazine/father-james-martin-interview.html>