

A Third Stewpot Bible Study

Welcome to the third in a series of three Stewpot Bible Studies from the book of Isaiah. Our first lesson was from Isaiah 1;1,10-20, in the part of Isaiah which is often referred to as "First Isaiah". Our second lesson was from Isaiah 42:1-9, in what is often called "Second Isaiah". Our third lesson will rise from Isaiah 56:1-8, which is in the part of Isaiah which is often known as "Third Isaiah."

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance will be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. 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." For thus says the LORD: 'To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, 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. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant-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. Thus says the LORD GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

Isaiah 56:1-8

In our previous two Stewpot Bible Studies, we used a four-way approach to Biblical interpretation which we call **ABAB**: approaching a passage of scripture by looking **at** it, **behind** it, **around** it and **beyond** it. Let's look at Isaiah 56:1-8 through that four step, quadrifocal lens.

1. **Looking AT Isaiah 56:1-8**: To look **at** the words on the page in this passage is to watch the writer of this part of Isaiah draw the circle of the welcome of God as wide as the world.

The passage begins with an admonition for the people of God to "Maintain justice and do what is right." In the verses which follow, we see something of what "maintaining justice and doing what is right" might mean in the mouth of God: *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." ...For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the*

LORD GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

With those words, the writer of this part of the book of Isaiah appears to identify *justice* with a wide welcome and *doing what is right* with an inclusive hospitality; intentionally opening the door to the house of God to two groups of persons, eunuchs and foreigners, who, at other times, had been intentionally excluded from the family of God. (Eunuchs in Deuteronomy 23:1; foreigners in Exodus 12:43, Deuteronomy 23:3, Nehemiah 13:3, and Ezekiel 44:9.)

That is something of what we see when we look **at** Isaiah 56 :1-8. Now, let's take a step back from the words on the page, and take a look **behind** this passage of scripture.

2. **Looking BEHIND Isaiah 56:1-8:** To look **behind** Isaiah 56:1-8 is to see, again, some of what we have already seen behind the first and second of the Stewpot Bible Study passages from Isaiah, concerning the circumstances which produced the Bible book of Isaiah.

While no one can say with certainty, most of the best scholarship we have believes that the book of Isaiah, as we now know it, is likely a composite of three major works, written across nearly three centuries: First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, written, perhaps, in the eighth century BCE, before the exile; Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55, written, perhaps, during the exile; and Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66, written, perhaps, after the exile ended in 539 BCE.

As we remembered, together, in our previous two Stewpot Bible Studies from Isaiah, when we speak of *the exile* as the circumstance which produced Isaiah, we are referring to the displacement of some of the people of Judah to Babylon, beginning in 597 BCE. Forced into captivity by the Babylonian army, their exile in Babylon lasted until 539 BCE, when the Edict of Cyrus released them to return to Judah.

Most of the best scholarship we have places our present passage, Isaiah 56:1-8, in the season after the return, Isaiah 56 opening the post-exilic writing called Third Isaiah.

(Interestingly, not only the book of Isaiah, from which our three Stewpot Bible Studies have come, but, also, many other parts of the Old Testament-which many call the Hebrew Bible, and which I call the First Testament-were produced, shaped and formed by the exile, including, but not limited to, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel and Haggai, not to mention some of the Psalms, most notably Psalm 137, and the first of the two creation stories in the book of Genesis, Genesis:1-2:3.)

3. **Looking AROUND Isaiah 56:1-8:** Having looked **at** and **behind** Isaiah 56:1-8, we turn now to look **around** our passage, to see how Isaiah 56:1-8 fits into the Bible's wider conversation with itself.

The opening words of this passage, the admonition in verse one for the people of God to maintain justice and do what is right, have plenty of company in the Hebrew Bible. Righteousness and justice are linked together in Genesis 18:19, Psalm 33:5, Psalm 99:4, Proverbs 21:3 and Jeremiah 22:3, as well as in the first of our three Stewpot Bible Study passages, where the one who wrote "First Isaiah" said, to the people of God, "Learn to do good; seek justice..." To look around the opening words of our passage from Isaiah 56:1-8 is to see that their call for justice and righteousness places them in a deep, wide stream in scripture.

To look around the remaining verses of Isaiah 56:1-8 is to stumble into the Bible's conversation with itself between *particularism* and *universalism*. Sometimes the Bible sounds particular to the point of exclusion (Exodus 12:43, Deuteronomy 23:1-3, Nehemiah 13:3, Ezekiel 44:9). Other times, the Bible sounds inclusive to the point of universalism (Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 5:13). When Isaiah 56: 1-8 welcomes eunuchs (Isaiah 56:3-5) and foreigners (Isaiah 56:6-8), it takes its place on the wide-welcome, more universal side of the Bible, specifically including the sexually different eunuchs (persons who may have been, in the ancient world, what we would call, in our world, *non-binary*, or *gender non-conforming* persons) and the ethnically different foreigners, both of whom, eunuchs and foreigners, were specifically excluded in Deuteronomy chapter twenty-three; a welcome which reaches its pinnacle in Isaiah 56:7, words Jesus will invoke in Mark 11:17, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Having looked **at**, **behind**, and **around** Isaiah 56:1-8, we have one more step to take

in our four- step "*Stewpot quadrilateral*"; looking **beyond** our passage; building the hermeneutical bridge from there to here, from then to now.

Looking beyond Isaiah 56:1-8:In each of our Stewpot Bible Studies, we have looked **beyond** the passage on the page, a spiritual practice which seeks to ponder the ways we might apply the truth which travels in the passage to our lives in this world; an effort at interpretation and application which is also known as *hermeneutics*, what I like to call "building a hermeneutical bridge" from the words in the Bible to life in the world.

One of the most apparent connections between Isaiah 56:1-8 and our present world might be those opening words which call the people of God, then and now, to work for justice. One simple way of thinking of the kind of justice of which the Bible speaks might be to think of justice as "making things right"; specifically, working to make right those systems which are unjust.

The cumulative weight of the Bible clearly calls us to work for a more just world. When the beautiful and familiar verse, Micah 6:8, tells us what matters most to God, the list begins with "doing justice". What might "doing justice" look like in our time and place? We know what "doing justice "looked like for Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela. What might justice work look like for us?

The remainder of our passage, after the call to do right and maintain justice in verses 1 and 2, is all about God's call for the people of God to draw the circle of their welcome as wide as the circle of God's welcome; culminating in the sweeping declaration that the house of God will be a house of prayer for all people, including those who once were excluded; sexually different eunuchs and ethnically different foreigners.

How might that sort of wide-circle welcome be embodied in our communities of friendship and faith? How is a God-shaped, God-sized welcome embodied, daily, at Stewpot?

Questions for conversation:

In her memoir, *I'm Still Here*, Austin Channing Brown says, "Reconciliation can never be apolitical. Reconciliation chooses sides, and the side is always justice. "What are your thoughts about that statement?"

For people of faith, how should the Bible's repeated calls for social justice intersect current concerns such as immigration policy and health care access?

"At its deepest, Biblical justice means that, for people of faith, all cannot be fully well for any of us until all is finally well for all of us." How do you feel about that statement? What are some practical ways we can work for Biblical justice?

What are some specific ways Stewpot works for justice?

How does Stewpot embody the wide welcome called for in Isaiah 56:1-8?

At what point, and with which people, does the wide welcome of full inclusion become most complex and difficult for you?

There is a remarkable song called *Crowded Table* (written by Brandi Carlile, Natalie Hemby and Lori McKenna) which beautifully captures the abundant inclusion of "My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples". Playing it might be a prayerful way to close a study of Isaiah 56:1-8.