



2026 Summer Bible Reading Plan

WAY IN THE WILDERNESS

with Isaiah

Welcome!

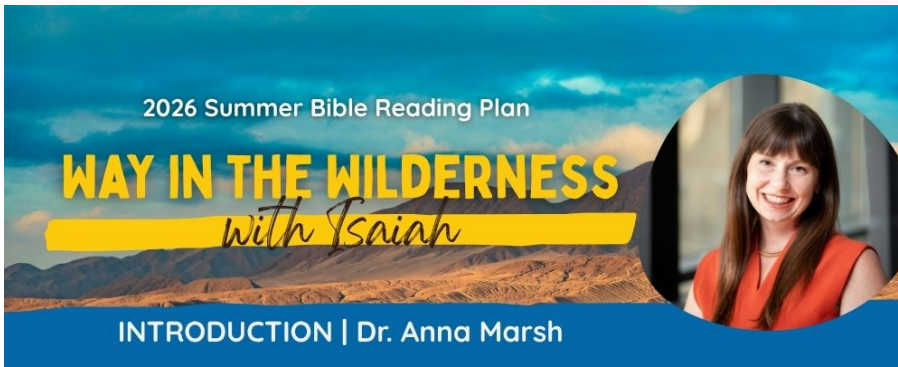
This summer, journey together with folks across the synod through the book of Isaiah—a sweeping landscape of warning and promise, exile and homecoming, lament and hope. Along the way, you'll hear the voices of pastors and lay leaders from across the North Carolina Synod, each sharing reflections on a portion of Isaiah.

At the top of each reading, be sure to note the assigned Scripture passage. Each writer chose to reflect either on their complete assigned passage or only on a section. Consider reading the entire assigned passage so that, together over these 19 days, we'll journey through the whole book of Isaiah.

You will begin by hearing from biblical scholar, Dr. Anna Marsh. She offers an introduction to Isaiah that provides historical context and thoughtful questions to enrich your reading.

As we travel this wilderness road together, may we discover anew the God who still prepares a way where there seems to be no way.

This Summer Bible Reading Plan is brought to you by the NC Synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry. This journey through Isaiah is the eleventh Bible reading plan. Thank you for engaging in the Bible together! See the previous compilations at www.nclutheran.org/engage-the-bible.



Introduction: *Way in the Wilderness with Isaiah*

No matter where you are from, the landscape of the place you think of as home carves the contours of your imagination. When I need to find a

sense of calm, I always go to a lakeshore in Northern Minnesota at dusk—loon calls, pine tree reflections. As a transplant, I am still surprised at the red-orange Carolina soil that covers my daughter's clothes after a day of play at school. As you begin this summer study, I invite you to think of a landscape that was formative for you. What features do you remember? What feelings do you associate with that landscape? I ask this because the book of Isaiah is a book of memory, possibility, disappointment, and grandeur—it is a book of hope, with all of its attendant complexity. It is a sweeping theological treatise spanning several tumultuous centuries of ancient history. Because of this, scholars think that this is actually (at least) three books.

Let me explain: The first part of the book (Chapters 1-39) is dated to the 8th century BCE. The tiny kingdoms of Israel and Judah are ruled by different kings. These chapters are attributed to the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem. He is writing in a time when the Assyrian Empire is a pulsating threat to both Israel and Judah. In these chapters, we hear the familiar tone of prophetic warning. The kings have few choices; their power was precarious. The prophet urges a clear-eyed focus on the power of God to save; no human designs—from massive engineering projects like [Hezekiah's Tunnel](#) to alliances with other powers—will be the right course. The prophet says, *im lo ta'aminu, ki lo te'amenu* (“if you do not stand firm, you will not endure”). The kings (mostly) don't listen. This is the oft-unspoken truth of the Hebrew prophets: their words went largely unheeded. Eventually, Assyria topples Israel, intentionally mixing them up with other peoples Assyria had conquered. This was a form of cultural genocide—designed to weaken the community's connective tissue so that they cease to exist in a recognizable form.

Reflection Questions:

- Put yourself in the kings' shoes. How would you respond to the advice, “just trust God and everything will be fine,” in their circumstance? Is this wise counsel in all situations?
- Put yourself in the prophet's shoes. How would it feel to have a righteous message and not be listened to, and then to watch your nation fall to pieces?
- What kinds of “human plans” do you rely on in your life, in your ministry, as a congregation? What “alliances” do you make to manage fear and anxiety? When do those help, and when do they distort discipleship?

By Chapter 40, something big has shifted. Nearly two hundred years have passed, for starters. Scholars locate these chapters to the end of the Babylonian exile (539 BCE). They can't be from the same hand or voice as the first section of the book—we are in a totally different time. During these intervening years, Assyria has fallen, and Babylon has risen as the dominant power. What's more, Judah's belief that God was protecting them from harm was shattered in the final decades of that century (597-587 BCE), when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroying the city walls, the temple, and the Judahite monarchy and taking the people into exile. It is at the end of this period of exile that the anonymous poet-prophet's voice rings out: *Comfort, comfort, my people...tell them their penalty has been paid* [Isaiah 40:1-3]. Scholars call this person “Second Isaiah” because they are clearly influenced by the Isaiah

who was active two centuries earlier. Here we get big hopes, big promises, and big ideas. Second Isaiah returned in the first wave of exiles, and these words are designed to buoy the spirits of those who are coming behind him.

The prophet does not just promise a homecoming (which isn't always easy) but also that God will be tending to the journey back. What's more, they proclaim that this going out from Babylon will surpass the going out from Egypt [see Exodus 13:21-22], that the things God is doing in this moment will make you forget even the great things God has done in the past—it's going to be that much, that big, that great...because that's who God is. And it is here that we find the Hebrew Bible's strongest articulation of monotheism [Isaiah 45:5-7].

Reflection Questions:

- The exiles “settled in” to life in Babylon. Think of an example of settling in from your own experience; when is it wise and pragmatic to accept things as they are, and when is it resigned or spiritually numb?
- Where do you or your community most need a sense of comfort right now? What would you need in order to really believe it was coming?

Second Isaiah is responsible for at least chapters 40-55; there's a debate about their relationship to the author of chapters 56-66, which close out the book and are situated after the return, when the community is struggling to realize the grandiosity of chapters 40-55. Perhaps they were a follower of Second Isaiah, disillusioned by their context; perhaps this is Second Isaiah themselves, struggling between hope and despair as their restored city lurches into the future in fits and starts. (We call this person “Third Isaiah,” and if you've ever struggled with ping-ponging between despair and hope, Third Isaiah is your kin.)

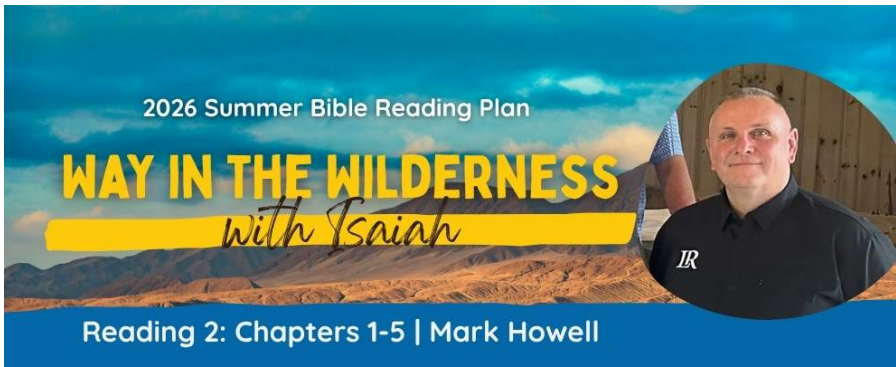
Reflection Questions:

- Reflect on a time or situation where you felt yourself ping-ponging, flip-flopping, or being bounced around between hope and despair. What did your spirit need at that time?
- What makes a promise credible?
- What kinds of environments sustain life? What kinds do not?

Comforting God, you call us back home time and again—home to our communities, home to ourselves, home to you. When we expect the journey to be difficult, remind us that you are preparing a way where it seems there is no way. We take comfort in the understanding that your Word stands forever, and delight in the fact that it never looks quite how we thought it would. In your holy name, we pray. Amen.

Anna Marsh joined the faculty of High Point University (HPU) as Assistant Professor of Religion at the start of the 2025-2026 academic year. She teaches courses in Hebrew Bible and Jewish Studies and directs their interdisciplinary Jewish Studies Minor. Anna earned her PhD in 2022 from the Jewish Theological Seminary in NYC, then taught at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, for three years before taking her current position at HPU. Her research areas include gender criticism, food studies, and literary approaches to the Bible. Her first book, *Food, Gender and Power in the Book of Samuel*, is forthcoming from Brill Academic Press in the fall of 2026. She presents regularly at academic conferences and enjoys teaching in local congregations as well.

Her hobbies include cooking, yoga, pub trivia, gardening, and always wants to know what you're watching on TV. She is currently settling into life in the Triad after moving to NC last summer with her husband (also a biblical scholar), young daughter (5), and old dog (14).



Broken-Open Hearts

The book of Isaiah is considered one of the most complex and influential texts in the Bible, including remarkably detailed messianic prophecies that paint a beautiful portrait of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Martin Luther even regarded Isaiah as one of the most profound prophetic writings in Scripture, often referring to Isaiah as “the

evangelist of the Old Testament.” These chapters provide a foundation for themes that recur throughout the book: judgment, redemption, the holiness of God, and the role of the faithful remnant. Also, they offer a profound insight into the spiritual and political conditions of ancient Judah and the challenges that still resonate with us today.

As we tune our ears to hear the voice of the Lord, who comes as both judge and deliverer, we discern the classic Law and Gospel framework, highlighting our sinfulness and God’s gracious provision of salvation through Jesus.

As the book of Isaiah starts out, Judah has gone astray. In a time of prosperity, it seems that Judah had gotten comfortable and fallen away from the Lord. The Israelites were still bringing offerings before the Lord; however, God held no delight in their sacrifices, for their hearts were not right because their lives were filled with the evils of injustice, cruelty, and neglect of the vulnerable. God called their feast days and incense vain and an abomination. We might hear this now as a reminder that humanity is spiritually sick from head to toe, completely unable to cure itself, and a call against works righteousness, that external religious works done apart from faith and a repentant heart are empty. True worship flows from faith and shows itself in love for our neighbors.

Isaiah’s words of prophecy “afflicted the comfortable and comforted the afflicted” then, and these texts continue to heal, binding our hearts with the announcement that our peace with God will be secured through Christ, the redeemer. “The Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills” (2:2). “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” (2:5)

Luther emphasized that Isaiah acts as a “mighty seer” who prepared hearts for God’s radical grace, with every promise pointing directly to Jesus. Isaiah does not leave us standing in the wilderness but announces and proclaims a Savior who chooses the broken-hearted, the captive, the fearful, and promises redemption and rescue. Faith is not quarantined from affliction, trial, and temptation but is comforted and sustained by the steadfast love of a God who is true to his promises in Christ Jesus. In Isaiah, God issues a stunning invitation: “If your sins are like scarlet, will they become like snow? If they are red like crimson, will they become like wool?” (v.18). This is a clear foretelling of the blood of Christ, which purifies us entirely. Forgiveness is an all-or-nothing reality given purely by God’s grace.

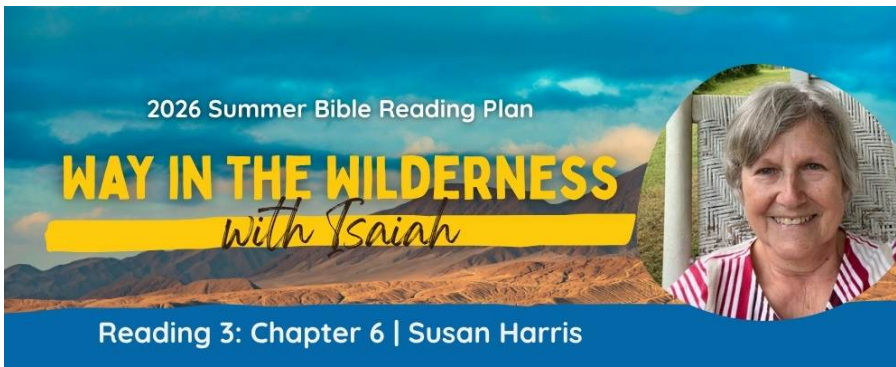
Our assigned texts finish with the “parable of the vineyard” (Isaiah 5). Love is basic to the identity of God; that remains intact throughout this love song. The owner cares for the vines and contributes the best divine effort to their growth and development. This is backbreaking work. It includes planting and clearing, as well as building a watchtower, a hedge, and a wall, and making the best preparations. All the work produces nothing but fruit that would have grown without cultivation. Even God seems stumped. How can it yield bad fruit? “What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?” (v. 4). The truth is clear: the Holy One who planted the vineyard, “looked for justice but saw bloodshed; for righteousness but heard cries of distress” (v. 7). This truth-telling is the fulcrum upon which transformation rests. Naming how things really are, not sugar-coating it or pretending things are okay, is necessary. Glossing over reality does not transform it but simply covers it up, making it unavailable for transformation. We would much prefer to be the ones speaking truth to power, but what happens when we are the power? When God speaks truth to power, and that power is us? Do we, as Jesus says, “have ears to hear?” Broken-heartedness can lead to broken-open hearts that have eyes to see and ears to hear, seeing what we had been unable or unwilling to see before.

Reflect:

- In what ways do we substitute empty routines, even religious ones, for a living faith that acts in love? [Isaiah 1:11-15]
- Can we know ourselves to be both God’s beloved and the powerful to whom truth is spoken?

Loving God, give us eyes to see and ears to hear your precious words, even when they reveal truths that are difficult to hear. Move us to be responsive in radical ways to your calling us to faith in you alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Mark Howell is a bi-vocational SAM (Synod Authorized Minister) at St. John’s, Taylorsville, and the Lincoln Co. Emergency Management Coord. He is also a seminarian at Wartburg Seminary in the TEEM program. He and his wife, Samantha, live in Conover and are delightfully enjoying spending priceless time with Stella Louise, their 16-month-old granddaughter.



Can You Hear Me Now?

In Chapter 6, Isaiah describes seeing the Lord and hearing the voice of the Lord. Have you ever heard the voice of the Lord speaking to you? On this occasion, the Lord says to Isaiah, “Whom shall I send ...”

Sometimes the Lord speaks to us through other people, but we may

not realize it is the voice of the Lord. When I look back over the past few years, I understand now that the Lord was speaking to me—through someone else. In my case, a very dear friend kept encouraging me. But unlike Isaiah, who said, “Here am I! Send me,” I had all kinds of excuses. I said I was too old, not smart enough, too busy. I said there are other people more qualified than me. So, I said, “Not me, Lord.” But the voice of my friend—or God speaking through my friend—kept urging me until I finally relented and said, “Here am I! Send me.”

Sometimes I wonder why it took me so long to hear God’s voice. At other times, I wonder if God spoke to me through other people prior to that, or even at the same time, but I did not recognize God’s voice.

I remember an advertisement several years ago for a cell phone carrier, and their tagline was, “Can you hear me now?” I imagine God may ask us that same question from time to time.

The Lord said, “Whom shall I send?” I believe God sends us all and uses us to speak to others in our lives, whether it be family, or friends, or even strangers we encounter. God speaks love, hope, welcome, and acceptance through us.

We never know when, and where, and through whom we might hear God speak.

Reflect

- What are the signs and wonders through which God has been revealed in your life?
- How has God spoken and acted in unmistakable ways?
- How is God equipping you to serve God and God’s people? How have you responded?

Patient God, thank you for not giving up on us. Help us to hear your voice and understand the message you are speaking. Amen.

Susan Harris is a lifelong member of Salem, Lincolnton, but is currently serving as a Synod Authorized Minister (SAM) at Sharon, Statesville. She and her husband split their time between Lincolnton and Blowing Rock.



An Invitation and an Outstretched Hand

Isaiah 7:10-14

Isaiah 9:6

Isaiah 9:12b, 17b, 21b

The world is a mess. Judah is being invaded, and King Ahaz is playing nicely with the bad boys, the wrong side. In Chapter 7, God sends Isaiah to talk with Ahaz, and it's not going well. The Lord told Ahaz to ask for a sign, and Ahaz refused, saying he would not ask or put the Lord to the test, even though this was God's invitation to him. Isaiah then gives a sign from the Lord: Immanuel—*God with us*—is to come.

I wonder how often we fail to ask God for a sign. A sign of assurance that we are on the right path or making the best decision. Do we look for something we might discover along the way to give us assurance, like a bird, butterfly, or beautiful sunset, rather than asking for something specific as confirmation? Do we play small when we're invited to be bold in our faith and our prayers?

In Chapter 9, we again have the prophecy of Jesus's birth, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. We hear about the disobedience and arrogance of Ahaz and the oppressors continuing to get worse. The oppression and fighting continue to escalate. The Lord raises his hand in anger and punishes them. They can't stand against their oppressors and are defeated. This chapter has both destruction, judgment, and death...*and* life and salvation.

Twice in the midst of these chapters, we are given the prophecy of the Messiah. The gift of life and salvation, the one who is and is to come. Jesus shows up in the messiness of this war, just like he shows up in the messiness of our world today, and in our individual lives. He's in the thick of it with us. Do we recognize his presence in our messiness, and do we welcome him into our messes?

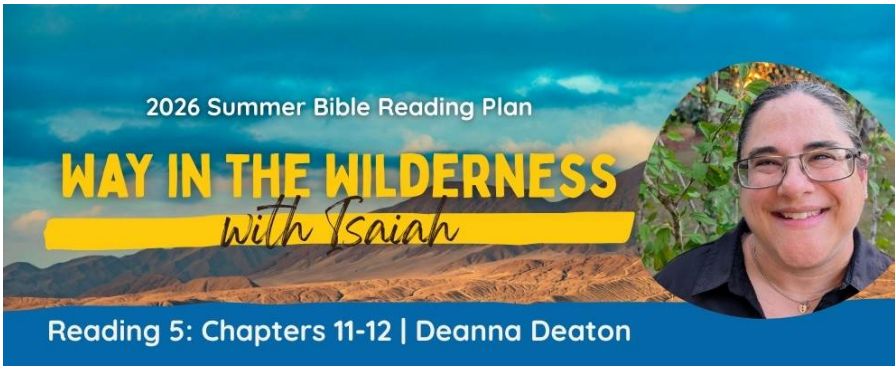
Three times in Chapter 9, God stretches out God's hand in anger. I wonder if the outstretched hand in verses 12b, 17b, and 21b is not only God's fist raised in anger and punishment, bringing destruction and death, but also God's open hand extended as an invitation to repentance and reconciliation? An invitation to return from their sins and to return to their God, to life and salvation. Is God issuing an invitation to come back into relationship? Like the invitation to ask for a sign God extended in Chapter 7?

Reflect:

- Where do you experience God's hand calling you to repentance?
- How do you respond when God's direction is not the answer you desire?
- Where do you see Jesus in the messiness of life?

God, thank you for your guidance, direction, and correction in our lives. We ask you to continue to guide and protect us from ourselves, even though we are kicking and screaming along the way. Open our eyes to the places and spaces you invite us to enter and the doors you close on our journey. Amen.

Kathy Jo McLean is a SAM (Synod Authorized Minister) serving the PALM Churches (Piedmont Area Lutheran Ministries) as Assistant Minister at St. Stephen's Lutheran, Gold Hill, and Mt. Gilead Lutheran, Mt. Pleasant. She and her husband, Jimmy, live in Mooresville and are blessed with two daughters, their husbands, and two grandchildren. Kathy Jo enjoys photography and time outdoors. Forrest, their 80-pound Collie, believes he is a lapdog.



A Bold Declaration

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the
adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. —Isaiah 11:6-9*

We live in polarizing times. Simple differences have turned into calloused divisions. People with opposing opinions have pulled so far apart that it feels like we live in two different worlds.

Like predator and prey, we have come to expect conflict. We choose sides. We stay on alert. We keep a safe distance out of necessity, but we brace ourselves for impact should the enemy cross invisible battle lines.

Into this broken world, Isaiah offers us a vision that almost seems impossible: predator and prey, natural enemies, sharing the same space in peace. And this is not just a pleasant picture. It is a bold declaration about the kind of world that God is bringing into being.

The world that God is creating assures us that the divisions we experience now are not our ultimate end. The divisions may feel fixed, even necessary, but they are not final. God is present in both polarities, and God is present in between. God is present in current reality, and God is present in the tension of drawing all things toward something new.

A day is coming when the separations we cling to will lose their power, and a deeper order—an order shaped by peace, justice, and love—will take root. The wolf will not merely be restrained; the lion will not simply be caged. Their very nature will somehow be changed. Violence will give way to peace. Fear will dissolve into trust. The world will not be a world of coexistence. The world will be a world completely transformed.

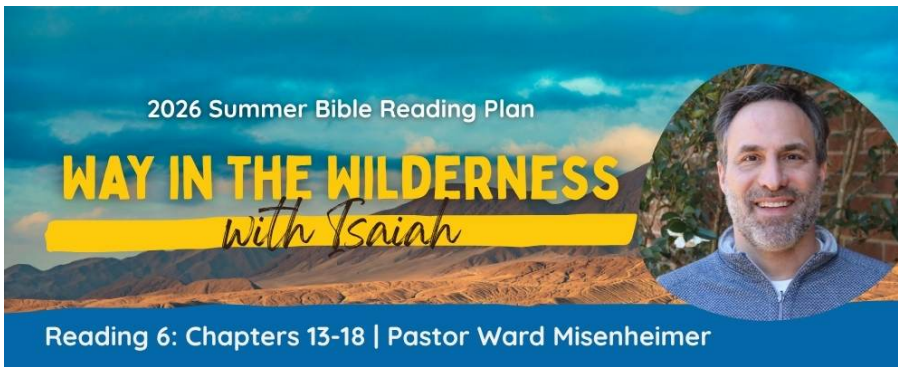
Until then, we are invited to live as signs of that coming reality: choosing gentleness over aggression, understanding over fear, and hope over resignation.

Reflect:

- Where in my life have I accepted division or conflict as “just the way things are,” rather than something God longs to transform?
- What would it look like, in one concrete relationship or situation, to live today as a sign of God’s coming peace?

God of all creation, we confess how easily we accept division and how quickly we learn to live at odds with one another. Plant within us your vision of peace. Soften what is hardened within us. Transform what feels fixed and unchangeable. Make us instruments of your coming kingdom—people who choose love where there is fear, and grace where there is distance. Until your peace fills all things, help us live as signs of what is to come. Amen.

Deanna Deaton is an elementary music teacher by day and a SAM (Synod Authorized Minister) candidate by night and weekend. Deanna enjoys spending time with friends and family, napping, writing blackout poetry, making tin art, dabbling in watercolors, collecting orange fish, and taking care of her two cats. Deanna attends Trinity Lutheran Church in Sanford, NC.



“Could the World Be about to Turn?”

Our voices reverberated throughout the Iona Abbey Church as the question raised in the familiar hymn, “Canticle of the Turning,” felt more poignant than ever as it summoned the deep hunger of the prophets and

echoed the prayers of Christians who had worshiped in this place for centuries: “Could the world be about to turn?”

The prophetic oracles that Isaiah weaves through chapters 13-18 move back and forth between time and place as it proclaims the fall of previous empires and portends that same destruction of the next rising superpower to take front and center on the world stage. This pattern of rise and fall from Egypt to Assyria and from Babylon to Persia becomes a familiar theme of both warning and promise to the people of Israel.

For Isaiah, the prophetic announcement that Yahweh is the only supernatural superpower is paramount. Therefore, the pattern of rise and fall is not only historical and nationalistic but also cosmic in scope as a canvas is painted with images of a darkened sun and faltering stars. As the oracles speak of both destruction and restoration, Yahweh’s sovereignty over all nations serves as both a warning and promise of which the kingdom of Judah is not excluded or immune. For Isaiah, trust in Yahweh’s sovereignty is the basis for how Israel lives as a covenant partner and for their instrumental role in Yahweh’s promise to bless all nations.

As a citizen of a nation that is considered a superpower, I find these oracles required reading, especially in our current context where bombastic saber-rattling fronts for real power and nationalistic pride become the litmus test for true religion. Isaiah’s warning is unambiguous; no superpower is exempt from the pattern of rise and fall.

*From the halls of pow’r to the fortress tow’r, not a stone will be left on stone
Let the king beware for your justice tears ev’ry tyrant from his throne. (v3, [Canticle of the Turning](#))*

Nevertheless, Isaiah’s promise of restoration is equally clear; Yahweh never relents in the hope of making good on blessing all nations who live in trust, who embody humility, and seek the goodness of all people.

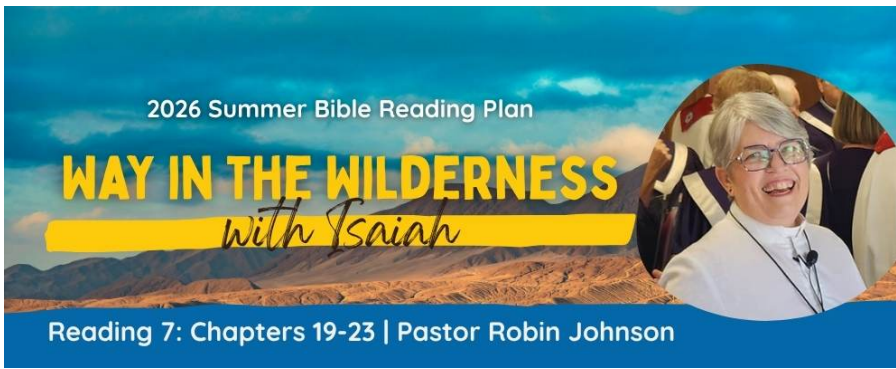
*My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn. (Refrain; ELW 723)*

Reflect:

- The message of Isaiah’s oracles feels contemporary and applicable to our lives today. How do you interpret Isaiah’s message?
- What are the ways you pray that our world is about to turn?

Come, Spirit of God, for you are the restless breath of love that sweeps throughout the world. You move where you will, breaking down barriers and stirring hearts to change, so that all may experience the rich blessings of your creation. Inspire each one of us to hunger and thirst for justice. Amen.

Pastor Ward Misenheimer writes: I have been honored to serve as the pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Charlotte for almost 20 years. As we have shared our lives together, the community of Advent has embodied the love of Jesus Christ for me and for my family, and they have taught me how to be more authentic and bolder in proclamation. I have two adult children who keep me both honest and grounded, and I love them more each day.



The Hope that Shines and Sustains Us

How long till daybreak? How long will this night last? —Isaiah 21:11 (The Message)

When I was a teenager, my mom brought home several library books on interpreting dreams. After that, we'd be at breakfast or in the car,

and she would talk about her most recent dream and what it meant. But every once in a while, she'd announce God had talked to her.

Years later, I came to appreciate what a difficult period this had been for my mom. Her closest sister had committed suicide. And my parents' marriage was crumbling. She never said, but she must have been suffering deeply. I suspect she had moments of crying, "How long will this night last?" She needed comfort, and dreams were a good place to hear God.

These five chapters are full of raw anger and fear. Isaiah was written during a time of great conflict between Israel and other nations; Israel had broken into two kingdoms. The people had turned away from God, who now promises judgment so severe Isaiah could physically feel it.

The prophet hears and shares his vision of God's furious voice, warning of devastation if people don't change. Using poetry, Isaiah amplifies God's voice so the people of Israel will turn back to God and trust only in God's promises, protection, and salvation.

This is a troubling voice for those of us who listen for God's voice when we are suffering. In our moments when, like my mom, we are often desperate for hope and comfort.

But Isaiah doesn't stop with an angry God. Morning is coming. Even if we don't know when the sun will shine again.

Isaiah's poetry reminds us that God's steadfast love is with us even in persistent struggles. A message echoed today in songs of hope that assure us of God's love, peace, and justice. Such as in the gospel song, *How I Got Over*, that Mahalia Jackson belted out to the crowds who stood for civil rights with Martin Luther King, Jr, on the National Mall in 1963:

My soul look back and wonder, How did I make it over. But, soon as I can see Jesus, The man that died for me, Man that bled and suffered ... I'm gonna thank him 'cause he never left me...I `rose this morning, I feel like shouting..., I just gotta thank God for being so good, God been good to me.

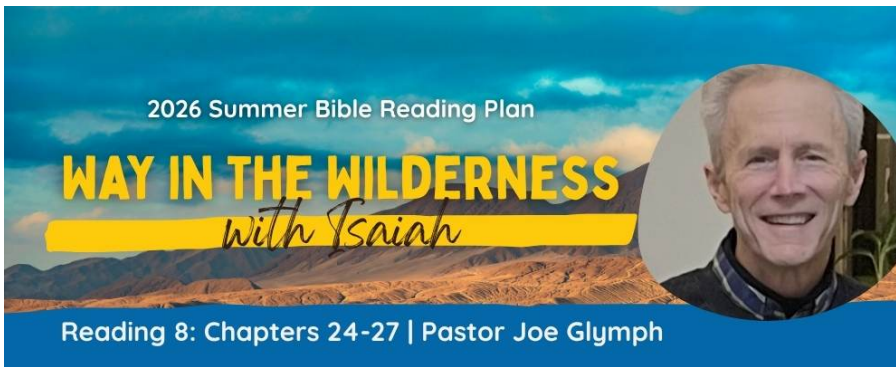
This is the hope that shines and sustains us.

Reflect:

- When have you heard God's voice? Did you tell others?
- When a friend says, "God will severely punish those who sin," what might you say about God and hope?

God of resurrection hope, thank you for dreams and songs that bring your voice to us, especially in times of fear and grief. We search for and trust your voice that comforts us, challenges us, is always with us, and brings us hope. Amen.

Pastor Robin Johnson lives in Wilmington with her husband, Eldon, and her little dog, Bonnie. She is always listening to the voices around her, including God's.



Swallowing Up Death, Wiping Away Tears

A Carolina wren family decided to build their home in a basket we have on our back porch. We watched the mom and dad going in and out with materials, carefully crafting what might be a starter home for their kids. Then after a time, sure enough,

we heard “cheeps” sounding from the basket. But last week I went outside to re-pot a calla lily, and lying on a stone near the basket was a wren baby gasping for breath. I could do nothing about it and have no idea just how he arrived there. But after a few moments, the little bird died. Yes, it was sad. And yes, it brought to mind our Lord Jesus’ words, “...not a sparrow will fall to the ground without the Father...” (Matthew 10:29)

God the Father knows of death. And it is our Divine Parent’s desire and intent to swallow death up. In fact, the Holy One has a banquet planned—more sumptuous than we could ever imagine. Because there in that day the LORD will destroy this shroud that has been cast over us by death. The fears and frustrations, the tears and terrors that many of us have faced when death has visited us so closely will be no more. Whether through a loved one’s long illness or from a sudden and shocking loss, we know this predator all too well.

But the prophet Isaiah declares the Lord our God will come, swallowing up death and wiping away our tears. Even as we are promised in Revelation 21, here in the recesses of Isaiah’s words, where there is gloom all around, we receive good news. Tears are real, to be sure, but there is a God who comes—who will finally swallow up death and wipe our tears away.

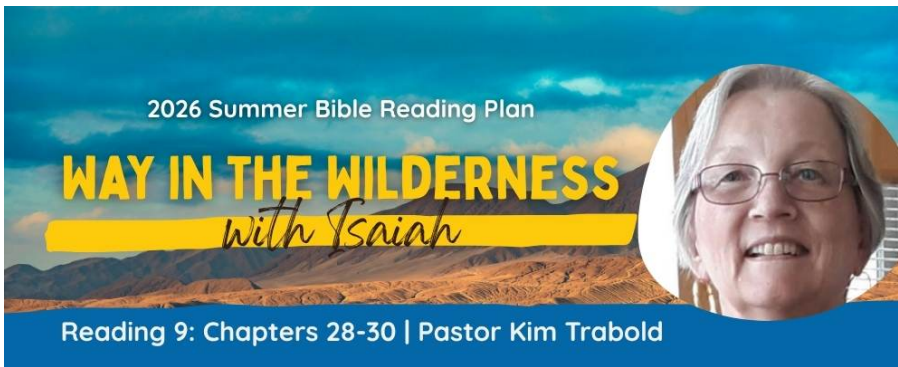
In the meantime, and it indeed can be a mean time, we know through the resurrection of Jesus the Christ that the declaration of the prophet is sure and true. He has even provided for us a foretaste of that marvelous feast that the Divine Caterer will one day set for us. And as we receive that foretaste at our Lord’s command, he gives us strength to live and serve each day with hope.

Reflect:

- What part of this passage especially gives you hope?
- In tearful times, who has been a good companion, reminding you of the prophet’s promises?

Thank you, God of mercy, for your promises that bring hope amid all of the pain that confronts us. When tears and hurts seek to overwhelm me, grant me strength to hear your word anew and so continue the journey of faith with all your people. Through Christ Jesus, our Light. Amen.

Pastor Joe Glymph is actively retired in Cornelius, after serving two congregations in South Carolina and Florida for 29 years. Before seminary, he worked with a construction engineering company for 10 years. He is married and is blessed with one daughter, three bonus daughters, and an assortment of five grandchildren.



The Holy One Who Waits

Reflecting on Isaiah, I think about the passage that concludes with these words: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’” (Isaiah 6:8). I wonder if Isaiah ever regretted saying those words as he went about speaking for

God. Reading these chapters of Isaiah (28-30), I kept thinking, “This is the same thing over and over.” I even caught myself rolling my eyes. Surely, Isaiah must have rolled his eyes a time or two.

God is quite unhappy about them all; the drunkards, scoffers, rebellious, faithless children, a people who don’t want to hear hard truths or ask hard questions, only smooth things that are easy to swallow, easy answers that make them feel good.

Here in chapter 30, the Holy One instructs Isaiah to write it all down. What God has to say is too important to just keep trying to pass it on by word of mouth. God’s word needs to be remembered and referred to by generations to come. They need to know the reasons for what has befallen their people and learn that their security is in God alone.

Instead of seeking God’s guidance and protection, God’s people were seeking guidance and protection from Egypt. EGYPT of all neighbors! How long would God’s people wander and charge about, acting as if the God who delivered them from Egypt no longer cherishes them, no longer exists? They were in too much of a hurry to make things happen to wait upon the Holy One for deliverance.

But isn’t that just like me sometimes—more often than I’d like to admit? I don’t know about you, but I often have a hard time waiting on God. How many times have I thought I should take matters into my own hands, MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN, instead of waiting on God?

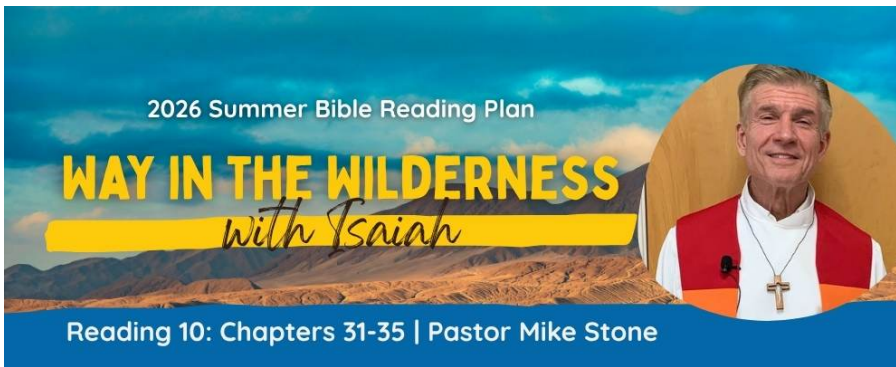
But God is not like me. God never tires of waiting for us. Even in anger and disappointment at our unfaithfulness, the Holy One waits. Not simply waits, but waits with longing for our return, waits with plans for a future of healing, reconciliation, joy, and abundant life.

Reflect:

- In the chaos of today’s world, God waits. Our baptismal vows call us to work for justice and peace. Do you see yourself as having a prophetic voice for today?
- Where in your own life might God be calling to you to return and rest, to sit in quietness and trust?

O Holy One who waits, who delights in being gracious, merciful, and just, bend our hearts toward you, that we might learn from you the way we should walk. Move us to desire what you desire for your world. Help us to listen for your voice and teach us to use our voices for your glory. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Kim Trabold is a retired ELCA pastor and a member of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Charlotte, NC. She enjoys baking, cooking, reading, writing, and going on spontaneous (and planned) adventures with her husband, Mike, and their dog, Zoë.



God's Crazy Love

The Lord will be the stability of your times...
—Isaiah 33:6

My wife Laura and I are blessed to be taking care of our 4- and 6-year-old granddaughters. We are helping our son, and are with them at least five days a week. We are referred to as

Lolli and Poppi. That is, we are *Lollipops*—‘suckers’ for these little ones.

We are not able to take the typical grandparent role of short visits spoiling the grands. Discipline is necessary to mitigate chaos and justice for those occasional fights that usually begin with the familiar squeal of “Mine!”

So, what does this have to do with Isaiah, God, and us?

Well, there is a lot of discussion in these chapters in which God calls out the world for all the injustices and territorial disputes happening among “sophisticated” adults. Some 56 countries are currently fighting, as of last count. For having been written 2800 years ago, this is a timeless word from God.

Woven within Isaiah’s relatable words are the tensions between trust in worldly power and might or trust in the persistent mercy of a loving God.

We know this familiar Scripture so well—“God so loved the world,”—but forget God does so, not because we are so lovable, but in spite of ourselves. The contrast shows how crazy and supernatural God’s love is. Though the world continues to put trust in things that will disappoint and disappear, Isaiah’s message is clearly focused on a hope that, despite it all, sees that the only thing crazier than this world is God’s crazy love.

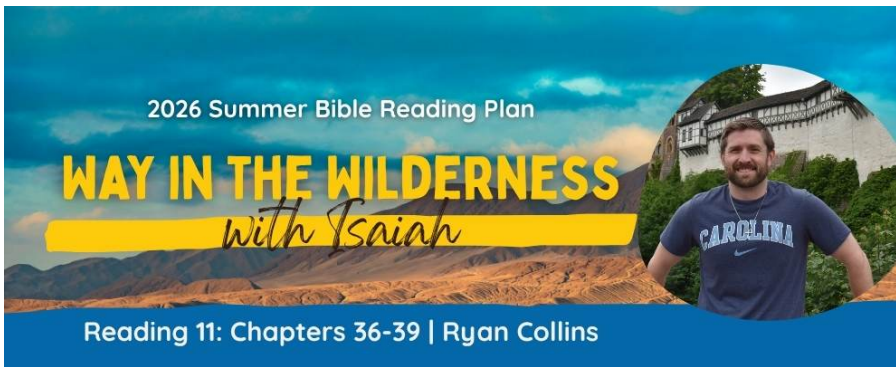
No wonder the early Christians had that apt phrase, “Don’t say, ‘Look what the world has come to,’ but rather, ‘Look who has come into our world!’” Trusting in that love is where we find true joy. As the last verse puts it, those who trust in God, “shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Reflect:

- Do you believe that what or who we put our faith and trust in matters?
- Would you agree that the world has lost its way and is paying the price for our disobedience?
- How do the words of C.S. Lewis, “The doors of hell are locked from the inside,” fit into this understanding?

Lord, you tell us over and over again because we need to hear it, to trust in you and not lean on our own understanding. We continue to put our faith in things we should not, and the consequences can be dire. Thank you for never giving up on us and for your loving patience and mercy that always welcomes us back home to you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Michael Stone is a retired Lutheran pastor who has served four churches in 38 years of ministry. He is married to Laura, his bride of 45 years, and they are blessed with two sons and two granddaughters.



“Rebellions Are Built on Hope”

“Don’t be too proud of this technological terror you’ve constructed. The ability to destroy a planet is insignificant next to the power of the Force.” My fellow *Star Wars* nerds will recognize these

words spoken by Darth Vader in the original 1977 film. Vader is responding to one of his military commanders, who is gloating over the destructive capabilities of the newly constructed Death Star, which he confidently describes as “ultimate power in the universe.” Shortly thereafter, the rebels, led by Luke Skywalker, blow the station into stardust.

While I could probably fill a semester-long course on the theology of *Star Wars*, it’s hard not to miss the parallels between the Rebel Alliance’s stand against the Galactic Empire and King Hezekiah’s stand against the Assyrians. Both involve a powerful empire setting out to destroy a much weaker foe. Both involve a powerful empire assured of its own invincibility. Both involve mockery of the divine. Even the commander’s response to Darth Vader is very Rabshakeh-esque: “Don’t try to scare us with your sorcerer’s ways, Lord Vader. Your sad devotion to that ancient religion has not....given you clairvoyance enough to discover the location of the Rebels’ hidden fortress.”

At the same time, both stories involve our heroes winning the day through the power of their faith—Luke Skywalker’s faith in the Force; King Hezekiah’s faith in God. George Lucas and Isaiah remind us that empire, no matter how powerful and permanent it may seem in the moment, is temporary. God, and God’s love for God’s people, endures forever.

This reminder is especially important at a time when many of our siblings are feeling the oppressive power of empire once again. Like the Assyrian kings of old, modern political forces seek to impose their will through war, intimidation, disenfranchisement, misinformation, and deprivation of resources. And like those same Assyrian kings, they believe themselves invincible.

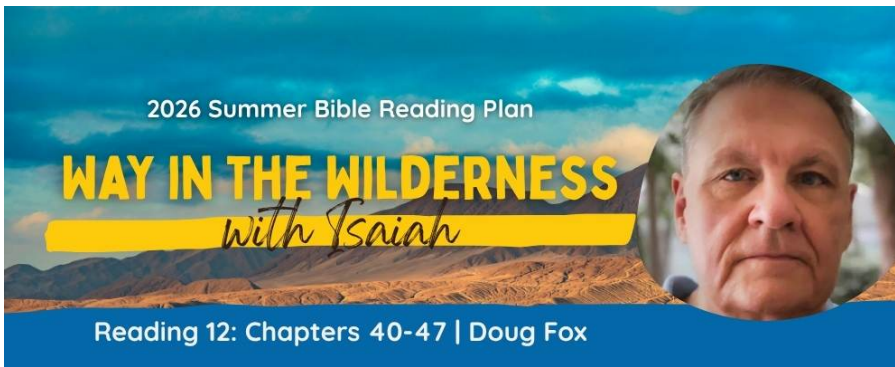
But we, as God’s people, know better. We know empire is temporary. We have hope in the promise of the Resurrection. Not hope in the sense of wishful thinking, but the confident expectation of eternal life and the fulfillment of God’s promises in Jesus Christ. It is that hope that sustains us during troubling times. To quote another—if newer—famous line from *Star Wars*, “Rebellions are built on hope.” May you find strength and courage in the hope of the Resurrection. And, of course, may the Force be with you.

Reflect:

- Is there a time in your life where you felt powerless to stop something bad from happening?
- How did your faith in God affect how you responded to that situation? Or did it?
- How can our faith sustain us and others in hard times without falling into sanctimonious theological traps like, “God has a plan?”

Beloved God, help us to remember that empire is temporary, but you are eternity. Give us the strength to weather the challenges of this world and the continued confidence in your promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Ryan Collins is a lifelong ELCA Lutheran and attorney residing in Cary, NC. He is an NC Synod-commissioned lay preacher and an active member of Christ the King, Cary, where he volunteers with the youth group and Advocacy Team. In his free time, Ryan enjoys reading, CrossFit, soccer, traveling, and, of course, watching *Star Wars*.



If I've Told You Once...

To begin, listen to Isaiah 40:1-3 as used by Handel in his ["Messiah: Comfort Ye."](#)

After 39 chapters of lament (which parallel the previous books of the Old Testament, scholars say), chapter 40 marks a turn to the future

for Israel and the world. We are to be comforted because God IS God and is working all things to our best benefit.

However, even God, the ultimate parent, like every parent and teacher, must reiterate it again and again for his stubborn, thick-skulled, recalcitrant children. Chapters 40-47 are a recurring litany of variations on The First Commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." (What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. —*Luther's Small Catechism*). I AM YOUR GOD! I AM! NO other "god" will comfort Israel.

And just you wait, I AM going to rescue it by unexpected means because I AM.

How often, as we plod, trudge, and muddle through life, do we too look for help everywhere but in the arms of the great I AM? Often, we want to bargain, set the means and methods. But the great I AM who comforted and rescued Israel is working to comfort us too, working through means we cannot begin to fathom or expect.

Scholars say that from Chapter 40 onward, Isaiah prefigures the coming Christ and the fulfillment of God's plan to rescue and reconcile the whole world to God's self. Israel looked for an earthly warrior king to lead them, and we, too, succumb to the modern trappings of power, fame, and fortune. We forget that Christ humbly came to heal, to lift up the poor and lowly, and in his command to "Love one another," He set love as the greatest act of power.

Having recently celebrated Pentecost and now in the "ordinary" time of the church year, we are called to trust that, *but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (40:31)*, because the great I AM comforts us and holds us fully in God's care. The Spirit will empower us to love one another fully as Christ loved us.

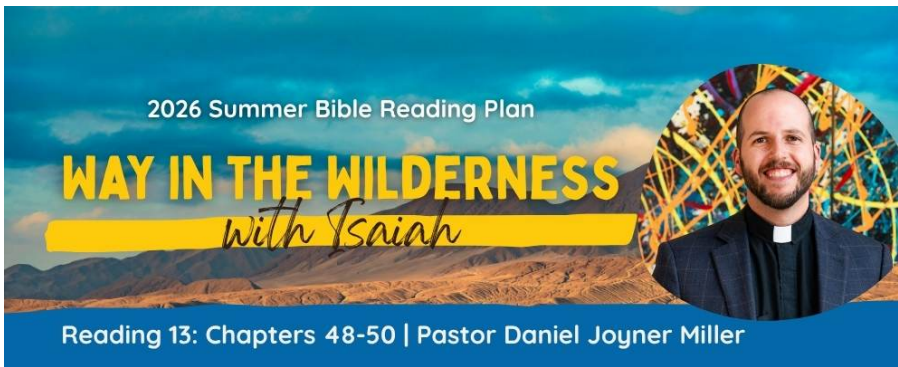
To conclude, listen to these last verses as turned into a hymn by Michael Joncas: [On Eagles' Wings](#).

Reflect:

- In what areas of your life have you forgotten God's promise to comfort, to care, to heal, and to uplift your concerns, worries, and troubles? And how might you find comfort so you too can be lifted up?
- How might you work to affect Godly comfort for others and be the wind beneath their wings to soar again?

Lord, humble me to trust that you, the great I AM, always have me in your care, will comfort me, and direct my ways by means even I cannot expect, so that I may soar and share your and Christ's love with all. Amen.

Doug Fox writes: Now retired after a 43-year teaching career in Lutheran parochial schools (24) and public schools (19), I keep myself busy assisting at my church, St. Mark's, Lumberton, and participating in community choir and theatre groups.



No Limits

The middle chapters of Isaiah are a threshold moment. Judgement has been proclaimed. Ruin has leveled the land. The people are in exile. Then the 49th chapter begins, “Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!”

For those who have ears to listen, what follows are words of comfort, the famous second Servant Song. And yet, while this is a historical proclamation of restoration for the people of Israel in the mid-6th century BC, as close readers of the text, we notice that this promise stretches farther and wider than to one group of geography-bound people and this one ancient instance in time.

The story of salvation that we hear told in the Servant Song is much larger and more powerful than that. And while verse 1, quoted above, hints at a global audience with its talk of coastlines and lands and people far away, it is verse 6 that brings this reality into more specific focus.

Isaiah 49:6 says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Yes, God will indeed restore the fortunes of the tribes of Jacob. But as ones who have already read Isaiah, we know how the book ends. And this hardly catches us by surprise. It may indeed feel like “too light a thing.” Of course, God was able to restore the exiles.

But what about you? What about me? Our futures are not yet written. What about the world around us? How light will the work be to restore our brokenness? How light will the work be to restore the brokenness of our world? These days it seems like a great and weighty task. In our gravest moments of doubt, are we even sure that God is up for the task at hand?

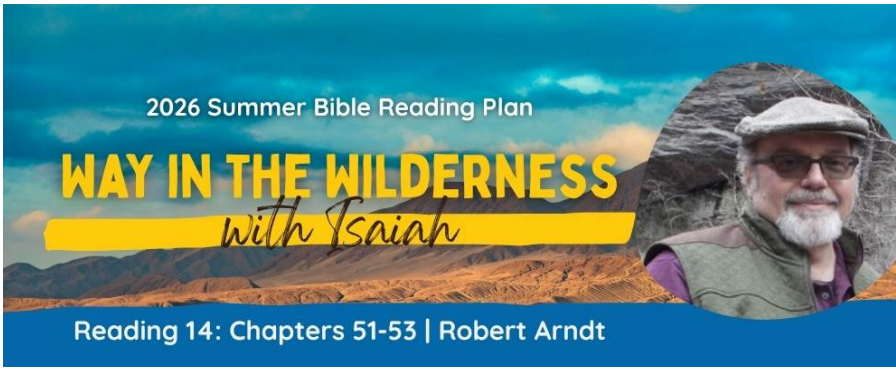
And yet, if we are going to learn any lesson from Isaiah, it is that the work of God and the salvation offered from God’s Servant extends all the way down through the ages, from the 6th century BC to our present age. It extends geographically to coasts both near and far. It extends to people who are like us and people in lands far away who seem so different. It even extends from this mortal sphere to heaven itself. For God, there are no limits.

Reflect:

- Who are the forgotten people and places in this world that we need to remember are never too far away to be a part of God’s story of love and salvation?
- How does the prophecy of the Servant in Chapter 49 mirror the life and prophetic witness of who we know Jesus will be?

God of restoration, every person on this earth has their names engraved on the palms of your hands. Empower each one of us to boldly proclaim the truth that your saving love extends far beyond the limits of our limited imaginations. When we feel discouraged, stuck, or far from home, help us remember that you are the light and salvation for our broken lives and world. Amen.

The Rev. Daniel Joyner Miller is Senior Pastor at St. John’s in Salisbury, NC. Before moving to North Carolina, Dan served in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod. His wife, the Rev. Kendra Joyner Miller, serves as the Chaplain and Director of the Lilly Center at Catawba College in Salisbury, and together they have three young children and an old dog.



Defeated and Alone in the Wilderness

So, what's your frame of mind as you read these three chapters?

Personally, I am a bit confused.

Is this an exhortation? A plea? A command?

In my mind, I hear the Disney

character, Edna Mode, fashion designer to superheroes, as she chastises Helen Parr (aka Elastigirl), wife to Mr. Incredible, for forgetting who she is as she swats her with a rolled-up newspaper.

Then I hear a football coach in a locker room at halftime, pleading with his players to wake up and do better, to play with more heart and urgency.

And I hear a drill sergeant barking orders at his recruits.

A prophet could have employed any of these methods to speak to the Israelites returning from exile. They had forgotten a lot. And Isaiah is reminding them what God has done for them, and what they have accomplished in the past with God's help.

I get it. Like most of us, I have been down in the dumps, listless, and moping around.

Sometimes an encouraging word is all I need to get myself restarted. Sometimes it takes a direct order. Sometimes it takes a dash of cold water in the face to get me moving.

Listen. Look. Lift. Awake. Rouse. Rise up.

All imperative verbs, words of action a defeated people needed to hear. Isaiah knows that more than these imperative verbs is needed. He knows they need a word of hope, a word of promise. Isaiah reminds the ones in the wilderness of these reassuring words from God. "I, I am the One who comforts you."

This is unlike most other "I am" statements in the Old Testament. It is a statement not of power but of reassurance. God is both comforting and everlasting, always with God's people.

The Israelites have forgotten the hope and promises of God.

Listen. Look. Lift up.

Awake. Awake from your slumber.

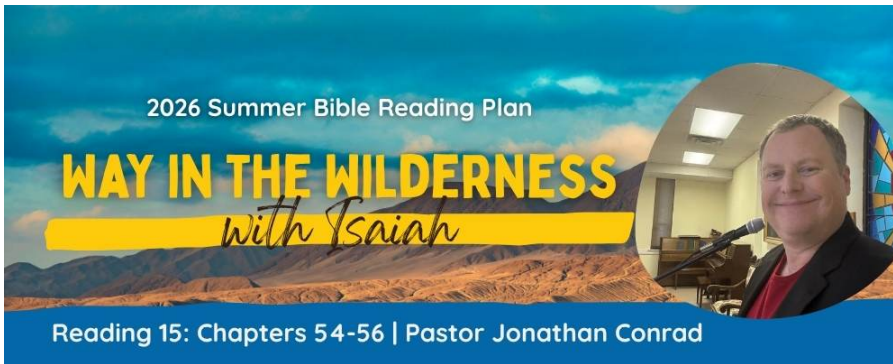
Remember the promise and steadfastness of God.

Reflect:

- What motivates you when you feel listless and out of touch with the world?
- What is your favorite "I am" statement of God? Why?

Dear God, in the wilderness of life, it is easy to feel lost, abandoned, and alone. We feel cut off and rootless. Let us never forget: you, O God, are our rock, the mountain to which we look for guidance. Let us ever listen for your words and never forget that you are the Lord who comforts. Amen.

Robert Arndt is a lay preacher and a member of the Synod Council. He is the Director of Reference Services at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Robert and his wife, Julie, live in Pembroke and enjoy the wild and scenic frontiers as they chase Robert's golf ball around various golf courses.



“Llama, Can You Hear Me?”

A few years ago, my family and I traveled to Lakeside, Ohio, to visit family. While there, we went to a drive-thru animal park. At first, it was charming—goats, sheep, deer, and llamas wandering up to the car. But quickly, it turned overwhelming. Animals surrounded us, pressing in, sticking their faces through the window, even nibbling at the car. What began as cute became chaotic.

A week later, something similar happened—this time at a car dealership. I pulled in just to look, but before I could even park, salespeople approached from every direction—smiling, waving, ready to talk. I turned around and left. I’m sure I looked panicked, and I’m sure I yelled something like “Not this week, Llamas!”

Truth is, I get a little uneasy when someone is trying to sell me something. Maybe you do too.

Today’s reading from Isaiah may surprise us. The word “hear” is intended to convey a sense of urgency, like “Hey!” or “Listen closely!” God is reaching out, not to sell, but to offer:

For those who thirst—water.

For those with nothing—abundance.

For those searching—God’s Own Self.

This is the promise of an everlasting covenant—a steadfast and sure love that never loses value. Unlike anything we buy, it doesn’t depreciate. It endures.

And what’s the price? For us, it’s free. But it wasn’t free for God. This promise came at a cost—Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, grace is not cheap. It is costly because it cost God everything, even as it is freely given to us.

This isn’t a sales pitch. It’s a proclamation: “Listen up! God’s grace is real, given, and active.”

So, we don’t need to run from God like we might from a crowd of salespeople (or llamas). God isn’t chasing us away.

God is calling us home.

Reflect:

- Are there areas in your life where you distance yourself, even though God may be inviting you nearer?
- What would it look like for you to “listen up” to God this week—not just with your ears, but with your life?

Dear God, thank you for calling us back home when we feel the urge to run away. Help us to trust your grace, to listen for your voice, and to turn toward you instead of away. Amen.

Pastor Jonathan Conrad currently serves as Senior Pastor of St. Paul’s Lutheran in Wilmington, NC. His interests include praising his amazing wife and being a full-time chauffeur to his two children, while at the same time not being attacked by his two cats.



The Rest We Actually Need

*You grew weary from your many wanderings,
but you did not say, "It is no use!"
You found your desire rekindled,
and so you did not weaken.*
—Isaiah 57: 10

As I write this, we are in the thick of "Maycember," a month filled with

wonderful, beautiful chaos as we try to fit all the things into our schedule. We are longing for summer, for less-filled schedules, and a slower pace of life.

Except when summer arrives, it brings:

- Busy, active, full days entertaining kids
- Long car rides, flights, and travel that leads to short fuses and weary travelers
- Chasing the "perfect" summer with adventures & experiences
- Escaping our daily life in hopes of finding rest

Yet, little rest is actually found in summer. Sometimes, we hit August and wonder if we had a break at all! In the midst of all that chasing, we actually didn't rest at all. Sometimes, summers are so full of chaos that we end up wandering away from that which keeps us grounded—still feeling like we are lost in the wilderness, like the Israelites have felt for many centuries.

Written for a people who just aren't getting it, the book of Isaiah is trying to encourage folks to return to God before it's too late. Fearing God's judgment upon all, the tired and weary are encouraged to return to God.

"You grew weary from your many wanderings." Not only does this apply to the weariness felt by the Israelites, it also applies to us today. We try to "do" all the things. We try to "be" all the things. Then, we find ourselves wondering why we are so exhausted and why we feel so far from God.

We truly are not living into who and whom God calls us to be. So, we turn to summer. A couple of months full of sun, vacations, and perhaps...rest.

Yes, summer provides rest through longer conversations, intentional time apart from the busyness of the school year and remembering who we are beyond the Google calendar. These are great opportunities to reflect and prepare our bodies and souls for the fall to come. But even during the summer, we still need a different kind of rest.

We need the rest that restores our souls, that causes us to inherit God's holy mountains, that comforts us when we mourn. We need rest that gives us peace. I know I do.

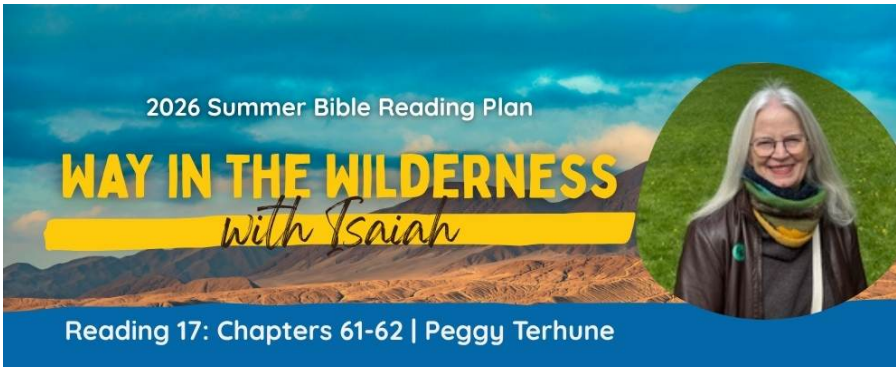
This summer, turn away from the busyness and turn towards the stillness that God offers your weary soul.

Reflect:

- Am I trying to escape exhaustion or actually heal from it?
- Where is God inviting me to slow down?
- What would a spiritually restful summer look like?

God, we are exhausted from our wanderings, our schedules, our busyness. Draw us near to you; helping us to breathe and find true rest. Quiet our restless hearts by filling us with peace and comfort. Amen.

Susan Jackson is a deacon serving at St. Paul's, Wilmington. She loves Reese's cups, Disney, the beach, and her 14-yr-old Shih Tzu, who rules the house. With the determination to try new things this year, she has recently discovered Pilates and, while she will never be Chef Ramsey, wants to grow in her cooking skills.



Compassion, Community, and Trees

I have always loved trees. There is a poem by Joyce Kilmer that I have loved since I was a child. In her poem, “I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree,” the poet talks about trees

that get to look at God all day, and “lift (their) leafy arms to pray.” This passage from Isaiah refers to “oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” Think of a towering oak tree. It’s solid. It’s safe. It offers shelter.

With the support of that tree, with Jesus, we get to be God’s hands and feet. We become that towering oak tree when we follow God’s mission. We get to do the uplifting things.

We get to bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, release from darkness the prisoners, comfort all who mourn, and bestow on them a crown of beauty. We get to offer the oil of joy, a garment of praise, rebuild the ancient ruins, and renew the ruined cities.

But when I think of our broken world, filled with sin, conflict, war, sadness, hungry people, people without housing, people for whom justice is a distant hope, I realize just how big this task is. We cannot do it alone. We need community.

My son gave me two trees. When he came to see that I had planted them at opposite ends of my property, he was so disappointed and asked me why I hadn’t planted them together. Didn’t I know that trees need each other? In my research, I learned about redwoods, which actually support each other by intertwining their roots. Community.

We need to work in community. We need to work quietly and loudly, shouting. As chapter 62 tells us, “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, For Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, ‘til her vindication shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch.” (NIV).

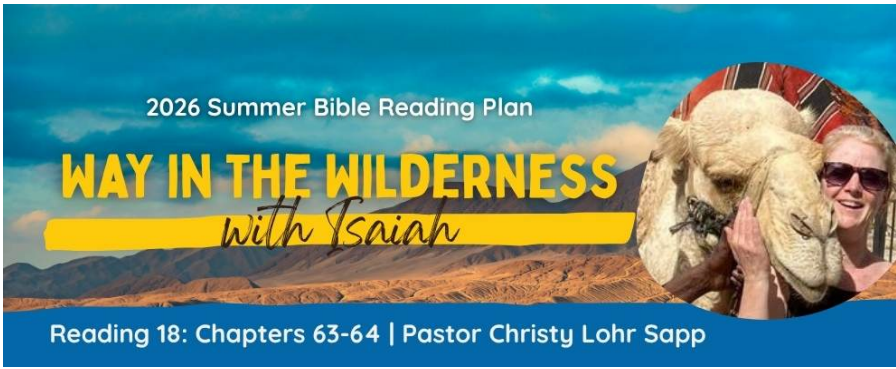
We are all part of a community. How does your church community speak up for justice, for the numerous groups mentioned in Isaiah 61-62? What is our responsibility, and how will we, as individuals, impact our community? It takes everyone’s hands and feet!

Reflect:

- Your congregation likely has specific mission fields that it supports. Are any of the areas mentioned in Isaiah 61-62 not addressed? Should they be?
- How do you, individually, support the church community with your hands and feet?

Heavenly Father, you tell us that the “Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on us.” Help us to see your needs in our world, and to take action to bring joy and healing to our communities, through our faith communities. Truly fill us with the Spirit, that everything we are doing, or things that we should be doing are clear to us. We want to fulfill your Scripture, Lord! Amen.

Dr. Peggy Terhune is a SAM serving Bethel, Salisbury. She is currently enrolled in Wartburg Seminary to become an ordained pastor. She is also the CEO of Monarch, a non-profit that supports people with mental illness across North Carolina, Rhode Island, and Arkansas. She loves spending time with her seven children, 10 grandchildren, traveling, knitting, and reading.



God in the Rubble

All our pleasant places have become ruins. — Isaiah 64:11b

Third Isaiah is set in the context of renewal. The people who had been exiled by the Babylonians are returning. The previous occupier has been overthrown, and the image of a divine warrior who conquers the enemy and wears the

blood of the vanquished occupies the people's imagination—imagery that makes many cringe.

These chapters move from vengeance to penitence and communal lament. The people are returning to cities in ruin. Colonial oppression, intercommunal divisions, and power struggles threaten the cohesion of the community. Rebuilding what was destroyed is hard work. Each crumbled building, every cast-down stone is a reminder of what once stood.

Chapter 64 concludes with the sad recollection of all that has been lost. Holy cities have become a wilderness, Zion, too, and Jerusalem is desolation. The Temple has been burned, and everything is in ruin. In the devastation, God feels absent, and hope itself seems trampled underfoot.

All the pleasant places have become ruins. This is also the lament today from the people of Gaza and the West Bank. Humanitarian agencies estimate that at least 90% of Gaza's physical infrastructure has been partially or permanently destroyed since October 2023. With over 2 million people still living amongst the rubble, this lament from Isaiah resonates across the centuries.

Similarly, in the occupied West Bank, settler violence is ravaging communities from north to south and east to west. Local sources report that 5-7 attacks on property and people happen daily in the Palestinian Territories. Churches, homes, farms, and cars are burned, while Palestinians who attempt to protect their property or challenge attackers are arrested and/or beaten. *All the pleasant places have become ruins.*

When all is lost, people often have very little to turn to besides God. Hope and trust become the balm to weary souls. Scripture's promises of mercy and justice quench hearts wrung out in lamentation. The ancient people of Israel pleaded with God to come down and defend them, to reveal God's very self to them, and to remember that they are God's own people (64:9) just as Christians in Palestine do today.

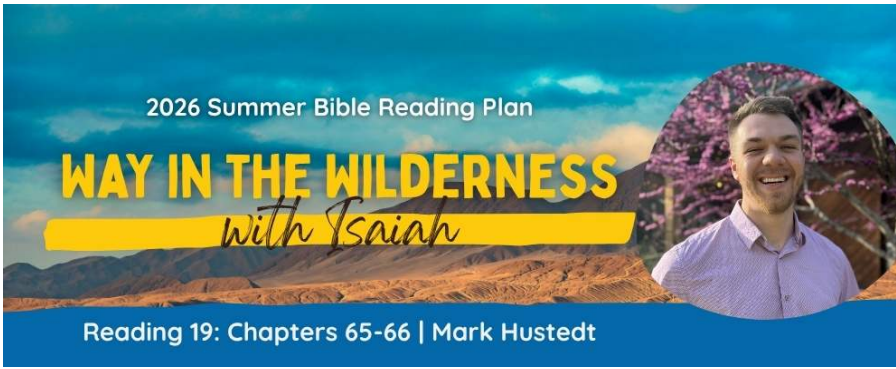
Zion has become a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation, and all of the pleasant places are in ruin, yet God is often found in the wilderness. The Holy Spirit moves over the formless void, and the Lord of heaven and earth can bring flourishing to ruined places. Palestinian Christians meet devastation with *sumud*—steadfast resilience and hope in God's justice—in the same way that ancient generations knew that the presence of the Lord offered salvation. (63:9) We pray for this salvation also to lift up all who call on God's mercy today.

Reflect:

- The phrase “we all” runs throughout Chapter 64 and reminds us that each human has a relationship to the divine. Yet, as humans, we each also have the potential for waywardness. How can we read Isaiah 64 as a call to collective action on behalf of our neighbors?
- The people returning to Jerusalem in Third Isaiah blame God for their disobedience. They say that God has caused their hearts to harden, and God's absence has led to their transgressions. (See 63:17a & 64:5) In a world where casting blame elsewhere feels easier than taking personal responsibility, where do you see the need for responsible, accountable leadership today? How can we prevent our hearts from being hardened to cries for justice and mercy?

Creative God, we are all the work of your hand. When our lives or the world around us seems to be in shambles, recreate us in your love, remold us in your image, and refine us in your grace. Restore communities decimated by violence and reveal your presence in places where hope seems lost. Come down to us in mercy and sustain all people with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Christy Lohr Sapp serves as pastor to the English congregation of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, where the many cranes dotting the skyline are a reminder that rebuilding is a centuries-old project.



Theological Therapy

Judgement, Salvation, and Hope: these are three of the words that title this Isaiah Scripture in the Bible I am using to study these passages. They are words we talk about often in church-related contexts and are concepts we explore as we build and maintain the foundation of our faith. I

have a personal belief that we can never truly comprehend the full depth and breadth of these words' meanings as they relate us with God the Sovereign, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit, our Sustainer.

God gives us direction to live virtuous and humble lives, Christ shows us how, and the Spirit grants us mercy and allows us grace as we try, and try again, and try again. When I and my congregation confess on Sundays that “we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves,” I am susceptible to a visceral feeling of dejection: the condemnation of our judgment as human beings, the constant reminder that we will always fall short. However, there remains a choice to trust in God’s promise of salvation.

We turn to Scripture to find comfort (Isaiah 66:13a) and to remember that God’s promise of grace remains through our doubt.

We pray the prayer Jesus taught us and profess to God, “your will be done,” not only in supplication, but as a commitment to trust. Christ not only shows us how we should love our God and our neighbors but—with the acknowledgement of our perpetual struggle to measure up—takes our condemnation to the grave and frees us to be vessels of God’s will to bring God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Instead of hyper-focusing on shortcomings, we are called to live generously, serve humbly, and to do just and equitable work. This is blessed and fruitful work (Isaiah 65:23). This is our purpose. This is the work of the Church.

Reflect:

- What does the phrase “theology of the cross” mean in your own words?
- Who or what do you turn to when you’re feeling down? When was the last time you had a vulnerable interaction with someone you don’t know very well?

Sovereign God, you created us, stopped, reflected, and you were very pleased. Thank you for the rushing waters, the grass between our toes, and the air we breathe between our teeth. We are stewards of your creation, tasked to take care of the good things you made, and you have decided we are good. As we care for our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, give us strength and courage to accept your grace, and always share it with your creation and our neighbors around us. We love you, God. Amen.

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