

A House of Prayer for All People: Isaiah 56:1, 6–8

I want us to begin by listening again to these words from Isaiah:

“The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD...
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer...
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

And then God says: “I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”

My Saints of Advent, listen carefully to this pattern: **Join. Bring. Gather.** Something is happening in this text. And God is the One doing it. **God is gathering.**

The God Who Gathers

“I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.” — Isaiah 56:8

Isaiah is not simply telling us what God's people should do. Isaiah is showing us **who God is.**

God says: **“I will bring.” “I will gather.”** And then comes the surprise: **“I will gather others.”**

Who are these “others”? Isaiah has already told us: foreigners who join themselves to the Lord. People Israel might have considered outsiders. And Israel knew what it meant to live surrounded by other peoples—Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Moabites, and others.

In human history, boundaries mattered. Identity mattered. Security mattered. Yet God says: **“I will gather others.”** But notice something else. God does not abandon **“those already gathered.”** Israel itself had wandered from God again and again.

And God kept calling them back. God sent prophets. God raised leaders. God provided priests. God disciplined them, forgave them, restored them, and called them home. Why? Because this is who God is – In God says: **“I will never leave you or forsake you.” — Hebrews 13:5**

God gathers.

He gathers those who have wandered. He holds those already gathered. And He reaches toward those still outside. **God gathered us. God keeps us. And God is gathering others.** That is the heart of this text. **Now That We Belong...** “**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.**” — Ephesians 2:13

And here is where Isaiah turns the mirror toward us. **Now that we belong... remember where God brought us from.** Sometimes belonging can make us forget. After we have been in the house for a while, we begin to know where everything is. We know where to sit. We know when to stand. We know the songs. We know the people. We know how things work. And human beings become very good at labeling one another:

Too white. Too Black. Too brown. Too foreign. Too young. Too old. Too poor. Too wealthy. Too educated. Not educated enough. Too different. Too this. Too that. We know whom we like. We know whom we don't like. And somewhere in between all those labels, there stands a human being whom God loves.

Soon the house feels like home to **us**. And that is beautiful. But there is a danger. We can become so accustomed to belonging that we forget what it felt like **not to belong**. Paul reminds us: “**You who once were far off have been brought near.**”

There was a time when **we** were far off. There was a time when we were outsiders. There was a time when we had no claim upon God's table. And yet God brought us near. We did not make ourselves belong. We did not earn our place. We did not persuade God to open the door. **God made us belong.** That is grace.

People Build Walls. God Builds Tables.

“**For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall.**” — Ephesians 2:14 Human beings naturally look for comfort and security. We want places where we feel safe. We want familiar people around us. We want familiar songs, familiar traditions, familiar routines. There is nothing wrong with comfort. There is nothing wrong with security. We need both. But there is a danger. **The danger begins when our comfort becomes somebody else's barrier.** And when protecting our security leaves somebody else standing outside.

Sometimes we build walls without realizing we are building them. Our friendships can become walls. Our routines can become walls. Our traditions can become walls. Our language can become walls. Our social circles can become walls. Even

the way we say, *"This is how we do things here,"* can become a wall. Not because we deliberately want to exclude anyone. Sometimes we are simply protecting what feels comfortable and secure. But Paul says Christ has done something remarkable: **Christ has broken down the dividing wall.** The very walls human beings keep constructing, Christ keeps tearing down. People build walls. **God builds tables.**

"My House" **"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."** — **Isaiah 56:7** Perhaps two of the most important words in this passage are: **"My house."** God does not say: "Your house." God says: **"My house."** That changes everything.

The church belongs to God. The table belongs to God. The invitation belongs to God. And the people coming through the door belong to God. We are not owners standing at God's door deciding who deserves admission. **We are people who were ourselves admitted by grace.** So when someone unfamiliar walks through the door, the first question cannot be: *Will they fit with us?* Perhaps the better question is: **What might God be doing by bringing this person among us?** Because before God asks us to make room for somebody else, God reminds us that **He made room for us.**

Christ Makes Us Belong

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God." — **Ephesians 2:19**

This is where Isaiah leads us toward Christ. Jesus came for those who were near and those who were far away. He touched people others avoided. He ate with people others rejected. He spoke with people others dismissed. He crossed boundaries others protected. And finally, at the cross, Jesus opened His arms wide. Not for one tribe. Not for one nation. Not for one class. Not for one kind of person. **For the world.** Paul says: "You are no longer strangers and aliens."

Think about those words: **No longer strangers.** Something happened. Christ happened. Grace happened. The outsider was brought near. The stranger received a home. The person who did not belong was made part of **"the household of God."** Christian hospitality, therefore, is not: **"Look how generous we are. We will allow you into our house."** No.

It is one person who has been welcomed by grace turning toward another and saying: **"Come. There is room for you too."** We welcome because we were first

welcomed. We love because we were first loved. We make room because Christ made room for us.

Who Is Still Outside?

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” — Matthew 25:35 So Isaiah leaves us with a question. **Who might God be inviting that we have overlooked?** Who lives near us but remains invisible to us? Who passes this church every week but assumes there is nothing here for them? Who believes church is only for people who already know the songs, the prayers, the Bible, and how everything works? Who is standing at the edge wondering: **“Would there be room for someone like me?”** Jesus says: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” That changes how we see the stranger.

Because the stranger is no longer merely someone **we** might help. The stranger may be someone through whom **Christ meets us**. So perhaps the more challenging question is: **Could God already be gathering someone whom we have not yet learned how to welcome?** God says: “I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.” God isn't finished gathering.

Sunday With Our Neighbors

“Come and see.” — John 1:46 That is why our **Special Sunday with Our Neighbors on December 6, 2026** matters. We are not inviting our neighbors simply because Advent wants more members. If someone eventually finds a spiritual home among us, we rejoice. But our invitation is bigger than membership.

Our invitation is: **“Come and see.”** Come into the house of the Lord. Come worship. Come pray. Come hear God's Word. Come sit beside us. Come discover the God who gathers. Some may become members of Advent. Some may not. **But all are people whom God loves.** Our responsibility is not to manufacture the outcome. We invite. **God gathers.** Perhaps there is a neighbor, friend, coworker, family member, or stranger who simply needs someone to say: **“Come with me.”**

Leave Another Chair Open

“People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.” — Luke 13:29 Imagine God's table. Jesus gives us this extraordinary picture: People coming from the east. From the west. From the north. From the south. And there is room at the table. We are sitting there too. Not

because we purchased our seat. Not because we deserved our seat. Not because our name was more important than somebody else's.

We are there because grace pulled out a chair and said: **“Come.”** But look again. There is another chair. And another. And another. Because the God who gathered us is still gathering.

So, Saints of Advent: **We have so many chairs left open, let them be filled.** Someone is still outside. Someone is still wondering whether there is room. Someone is still waiting to be noticed. Someone may simply be waiting for an invitation. And God says: **“I will gather others.”** People build walls. **God builds tables.**

Now that we belong, let us remember where God brought us from. We did not belong because we found our own way in. **We belong because God brought us in.** That is grace. And the God who brought us in is still bringing others in.

God gathered us. God keeps us. God is gathering others. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**