



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 24, 2025
ISAIAH 58:9b-14; PSALM 103:1-8; HEBREWS 12:18-29; LUKE 13:10-17

MAGNIFYING GOD IN TROUBLED TIMES

Isaiah 58:9b-14 *[If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.]*

Luke 13:10-17 *[Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.]*

What a delight it was to join the Evensong Choir this month on the pilgrimage to England where they sang each day in the hallowed halls of ancient cathedrals in Lincoln and Durham. Both are approaching

the 1000-year mark since they were built, and there was a keen sense of sacred spirit in these places where we followed the footsteps of countless souls across the generations as we prayed and made pilgrimage together.

One hallmark of Evensong is singing the Magnificat—the Song of Mary—the hymn of joy Mary sings when she visits her cousin Elizabeth when they are both pregnant. It could have been either woman's song.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

The choir sang a different setting of the Magnificat each day, sublime offerings of praise meant to lift our spirits amidst the challenges of life, letting their voices lilt and lift into the milieu of prayers across a millennium of time and merge into the timeless orbit of God's presence.

Worship is a radical act of courageous trust that God is with us on this journey! It is quite a thing to know that when we worship, we are connecting to something much greater than ourselves, stretching across centuries and around the globe, drawing us closer to what was, and is, and ever shall be.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, echoes the Song of Hannah in the Old Testament, where she sings her praises for conceiving Samuel, who would become the great prophet for God's people.



The Magnificat's enduring beauty is in its capacity to hold the space for suffering and hope at the same time, using poetic couplets. It is a hymn of hope amidst the injustices of life, and it casts a vision that upends the worldly ways of economic and social disparity, all while looking to God as the agent of righteous change and the proponent of consummate peace.

God's mercy is on those who turn to God;

God has scattered the proud in their conceit. (When we think we have it all figured out, we lose our way...)

God puts down the mighty from their thrones; God has exalted the humble and meek.

God has filled the hungry with good things; God has sent the rich empty away.

God remembers the promise of mercy made to the people of God, and the promise stretches all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, and to our time, and beyond.

What was, and is, and ever shall be.

I can imagine the woman in today's gospel, having been healed of the affliction that beset her for eighteen years, might have sung her own version of Mary's song. My soul magnifies the Lord...

But what stands out for me in our scriptures this morning is the passage from Isaiah. It's helpful to provide some context for this passage, which at first glance, appears to say that if you, the people of God to whom the prophet is speaking, if you just do the right things, then everything will turn out okay.

But we know that there is not some quid pro quo that ensures this is the case. There is something more to be gleaned here.

Chapter 58 was written in the 6th Century BCE, to the people whose parents and grandparents had been captured when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and took them as slaves to labor for the empire. They were deported into a foreign land, forced to adopt cultural ways that were not their own, and they were bewildered by it all. By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, as the psalmist said. How can we sing a song of joy in a foreign land?

The Exile lasted about 65 years, but with a change in rulers, they were allowed to return home. The prophet Isaiah is encouraging them to hold onto some measure of hope as they try to find their way home, while also reminding them that God is their true touchstone. If you take chapters 55-61 together (and it is well worth the read), we will discover that the exiles have taken a few too many cues from their oppressors and are engaging in self-serving behaviors. What's in it for me?

Instead of making their way together, they turn on one another, and one hoards while another goes hungry, one takes the yoke off

his own neck and places it on another. And they justify it through ritualized rationalization in the name of God.

They will never find their proverbial way home if they carry on this way.

Maybe it's human nature to do this, but Isaiah reminds us in no uncertain terms that it is not God's nature, and it is not God's plan. Mercy and truth must meet together; righteousness and peace must kiss each other, and they will, scripture says, but we can't always know exactly how or when that happens.

This doesn't mean we stick our heads in the sand, or resign ourselves to the suffering. The weight of the world's violence is a heavy burden these days. What we do with that burden matters, and how we orient to it matters.

Mary sang her Magnificat while pregnant with hope for good things to come, even while her people suffered terribly. She trusted that God was working in her greater things can she could ever ask for or imagine.

The woman whom Jesus heals wasn't expecting to be freed from her bent-over ailment that day, but she stood up straight and launched into her song of praise to God.

Isaiah reminds us not to succumb to the ways of the world, pointing the finger, speaking evil in one another's direction.

Neuroscience has long-since established the human brain's proclivity to focus on the negative. In our world of rapid news cycles, social media barrages, and sensational headlines, it is difficult to escape the snares

of negativity. What we do with the weight of the world matters, and I would suggest that Isaiah is not so subtly telling us that anything other than orienting to God is folly.

If God is not the source of our concern for those suffering, and if God is not the recipient of our interceding prayers, and the source of hope for our efforts and actions, then we will have lost our way.

But if we orient to God in it all, then we shall be like a watered garden, and we shall be called restorers of the breach, and we shall take delight in God, singing our songs of praise and hope and mercy and justice and righteousness and peace. A Magnificat in our own right.

May it be so.



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