

It's Just Beginning
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection:

*We would rather be ruined than changed;
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.*

by W.H. Auden

Hebrew Scripture Reading: *Psalm 66:1-12* (portions)

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;

sing the glory of the name; give glorious praise.

All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.”

Come and see what God has done: God is awesome in deeds among mortals.

The Lord turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.

There we rejoiced in God, who rules by might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations—

Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of the Lord’s praise be heard,

who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.

For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads;

we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

Gospel Reading: *Luke 17:11-19*

¹On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. ¹²As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, ¹³they called out, saying, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” ¹⁴When he saw them, he said to them, “Go and show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were made clean. ¹⁵Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. ¹⁶He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. ¹⁷Then Jesus asked, “Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? ¹⁸Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” ¹⁹Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Throughout my career, I have been asked quite often, (I suppose most pastors have) how I choose what I will be preaching on week after week. For the large majority of that career, while I didn't make a religion of it, I was guided by the lectionary: selected readings that, over the course of three years, expose preachers and listeners to 80% of the Old Testament and 90% of the New Testament. The practice prevents constant repetition of favorite texts and compels us to wrestle with more challenging ones. I did depart on special days in the life of the congregation: Stewardship Sunday, the ordination of officers, Mission and Youth Sundays, Music Sundays or events in the life of the nation or world, such as 9/11 or the death of Osama Bin Laden.

That practice changed significantly during the lockdown. I continued to begin by looking at the lectionary, However, while I have always striven to make scripture and sermons relevant to contemporary life and choices, I found that the unprecedented events in our individual, household, work, church and communal lives required a different attention, so led us to delve elsewhere in scripture.

Now that we are at a major transition point in the life of our congregation, that focus has shifted yet again. As we move to the conclusion of our shared ministry and shift to possibly parallel tracks of ministry apart, it is a time for reflection, for thanksgiving and for looking to the future.

In our final weeks together, it is not my role to suggest what you ought to do in the future beyond my retirement. It is my role to speak gratitude, praise of ministry accomplished, to speak truth (as it is given to me) of the current "state of the congregation" and to preach the promise of hope and possibility with God in Christ who is with us now and will be with us in the years ahead, together and apart.

It is fortunate I did follow the lectionary or you probably would have heard this text *ad nauseam*. It is one of my favorites. It also invites the question of what does it have to say to this left-of-center Protestant Church in 21st century USA, at a major transition point in its life. This congregation is unique and yet shares much with many other congregations in and outside our historic traditions. We have already been somewhat anxious and wanting to be more energized and effective in ministry; being guided by a Spirit-led Board. That was already our state of being before the announcement of major change

Like the ten lepers, we are more than ever seeking a little mercy, a little grace. We're not asking for too much; a few more people, a few more volunteers, a lot more money, a lot more mission, more relationships with our neighbors. A renewed and possibly revised vision of our ministry. We're just asking for a little of this, a little of that—some mercy. Like the ten lepers, we have our hands out, asking for gifts of grace.

Like the ten lepers, we ask, but keep our distance, avoiding the front pews—just in case mercy, grace and healing bring not only joy and comfort, mobility and freedom, community and welcome, but land with a thump; or come with more responsibility and accountability than we wanted.

We keep our distance in case mercy, grace and healing change things or worse yet, change us. So, we would really like to receive those gifts of grace, but we don't want Jesus to get carried away as he has been known to do.

Don't you know, that's just how it happens. Asking and receiving, we will find we have a little more energy, and a little less anxiety. We will also have our eyes opened to how we are called to use that energy as Christ's disciples. We, who have been healed and encouraged by Christ's

compassion and enriched by the generosity of God, are called to share that compassion and generosity ever-more widely and graciously.

The Spirit will continue to show up in meetings, worship, and in people's homes and hearts and prayers. Be forewarned. In times of stability and in times of change, the Spirit is a pesky partner constantly encouraging growth and our reaching to become ever more fully the humans God created us to be.

In these moments and in all the moments ahead, we will receive mercy and will be challenged to act as people who have been healed and given grace. The demand of accepting a gift is the obligation to use it.

It is already happening. This mercy, this healing are the things that make for wholeness and new generations of faithful service. Jesus says, "Go. As one people, name your bounty, the grace of God in your lives. Go. Act like you are healed."

Because the healing isn't over the moment we feel better or when the thing we asked God for has been received. It's not over when we're doing better, feeling better, have a vision, have a plan, are being formed and reforming all the time as a community of the faithful, responsible to and for one another and for the whole world.

According to the text, the healing isn't over until ... It isn't over until we turn and give thanks and praise to God—until we fall on our knees with gratitude, until we get up and go on our way into the world singing songs of praise and sharing the news of a merciful God—until our gratitude is so great, we have no choice but to put ourselves, body and soul, into living, sharing and serving.

The truth is that we are never fully healed, but then we are never as broken as we allow ourselves to believe. Sometimes we allow ourselves to believe we are more broken than we are because it excuses us from responsibility and accountability. The pesky Spirit will not accept that.

It is in the rhythms of knowing our need, asking for mercy, accepting God's grace, naming the bounty and giving thanks through sharing and service that we will hear the blessing and affirmation of Christ, "Our faith is making us well," moving us ever toward wholeness and our created goodness."

Today, as we get up and go on our way to gather around tables, let us give thanks and sing. And in our table talk, let us name and express appreciation for the things we have received from God and one another. The truth is, while some things are ending, in fact, so many things are just beginning. In the exciting, challenging days ahead, let healing, generosity of spirit, gratitude, and hope abound. So, let us get up and be on our way.

MORNING PRAYER AND THE LORD'S PRAYER

Gracious God: In this season when shadows of clouds race across the earth, when cool air from distance places blows our way and the sun shines down on it all—we are reminded of a planet, a world, a nation all under your care and formed by your breath. We are reminded of gifts and needs among people we do not and may never know—we are reminded we are not alone in blessing and in need.

We turn our prayers to the planet, that its powers for self-healing might once again be unleashed, as we are better and better stewards of all the earth.

...

We turn our prayers to people in every place, celebrating weddings, welcoming babies, grieving loved ones with words and ways not our own. We pray for the day when all these things come in their own time, not driven by starvation or disease, fear or war, violence or hatred. We pray for the power to do the things that make for peace in our lives, homes, schools and workplaces.

...

We turn our prayers to ourselves and our loved ones, our neighbors, friends and co-workers -- so that the healing we first seek for others, we might know in our own lives, bodies stronger, minds more clear, relationships reconciled, hope growing, patience and strength in the waiting for that which is to be and that which may not be as we wish

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All this we pray in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray together...

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**