

# Sermon

**Preacher** | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

**The Gospel** | Mark 1:14–20

**Date** | January 24, 2021



**ALL  
SAINTS'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*'Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:*

*That even as we grieved, we grew*

*That even as we hurt, we hoped*

*That even as we tired, we tried*

*That we'll forever be tied together'*

Lines from the iridescent Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem 'The Hill We Climb', that speak to the promise that lies within a people when they realize their common cause. Words that lift up the possibility of 'us' in an age of 'me'.

Togetherness was clearly a central theme at this week's Inauguration. Pope Francis' words offered by Fr. Leo O'Donovan's inaugural invocation, named the promise of commonality and the dangers of its opposite, stating that 'By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together.' Hopeful words for a time in our lives that has so sorely needed hope.

Yet the beauty for me about Wednesday was not merely the words that were spoken but the actions of ordinary Americans we saw later that night. Did your heart warm as mine did when you heard 8-year old Morgan Marsh-McGlone of Wisconsin talk about her lemon-aid sale, which has raised more than \$50,000 to support families facing food insecurity? Were you also inspired by Cavanaugh Bell of Maryland, also 8, who started a food pantry in his community, even delivering a truck full of essential supplies to the Pine Ridge Reservation of South Dakota. I couldn't help but think of those beautiful lines we hear at Christmas time from Isaiah chapter eleven, 'and a little child shall lead them'. These children don't need a lesson in what the season of Epiphany is all about – of the manifestation of God in the world – they're living it.

Wednesday's promissory look to hope made me think about the Weaver Movement, celebrated by New York Times columnist David Brooks. Look it up when you get a chance, and you'll see a rich tapestry of stories of people who, in Brooks' words, 'are quietly working across America to end loneliness and isolation and weave inclusive communities...[putting] relationships at the center of [their] lives. Amanda Gorman's poetic call to action this week was not some shot in the dark, it was a proclamation of a revolution of goodness already on the horizon.

We belong on that horizon too. Churches like ours, and indeed communities of all faiths, have a tremendous capacity to be engines of collective good in society. When they work well, faith communities are where we bring our better selves, our greater ideals, our nobler instincts. In this sort of place we learn how to see the world as a shared treasure to be cared for and humanity's diversity as a magnificent gift of God's own making. Here, we learn to rise again in the face of loss and adversity, over and over, as the spiritual muscle memory of our prayers gradually changes us to become the grace that we receive in the gifts of communion.

Yet, it is not only because we strive to be a force for good that means faith communities have something to offer this current moment in our national life, it is because we also know what holds us back from striving so. Communities of prayer see the heart. When we are faithful to our calling we are people who seek forgiveness both for what we have done and what we have failed to do. Places like this are where we can admit to our split loyalties, to the frailties of our moral imaginations. For you and I, church might be the only setting where we get to name what holds us back on the road to the kind of life for others we might hope for but struggle to lead.

Real change always requires honesty as well as vision. A changed world needs changed people. Was that not the invitation we were extended this week as a people: that we might change our hearts? That we might incline ourselves to others more than we have? That it was time for us to turn a page, to find what the Danes would call our *samfundssind*, a sense of collective responsibility and community spirit? A time, in the words of chef José Andrés, for 'longer tables not higher walls'? A time when we weave ourselves into what Dr. King called a 'single garment of destiny'?

A change of heart, though, is not a simple thing. We cannot merely decide one day to see the world differently and then expect that for every day that follows, we will. Two millennia of the struggle to follow Jesus has taught the Church at least some things about human nature. One is that change is not merely a matter of having the right aspiration, it is also a matter of excavating the deeply embedded stumbling blocks in our path that make change so hard to accomplish, none greater perhaps, than the age-old human failing called pride.

If the Book of Jonah, which we heard read from this morning, were to be given a central theme, pride would be a strong candidate. It is an almost farcical tale of how humanity's capacity for hubris blinds us. If you recall the story, Jonah is sent by God to proclaim divine punishment for the sinful people of Ninevah. Fleeing from his task, the story then follows the psycho-drama of Jonah's rejection of God's will, from the storming seas to the belly of a great fish. When Jonah finally goes to Ninevah as God commands him, seeing their repentance God offers a second chance to the people of the city, and Jonah's pride just can't bear it. He goes to sulk outside the city under a bush, which God promptly makes wither away. He pleads with God to take his life, so stricken he is at God's mercy for the Ninevites. Jonah simply cannot see God's grace, for all that is present to him is his wounded pride and subsequent self-loathing.

As much as we might hate to admit it, we've all been with Jonah under that miserable shrub, pride bruised, and stuck in the hole it has dug for us. The job that gets offered to someone else, and our subsequent mental rampage at everything that was wrong with them, and so rarely about ourselves. The fight between spouses or siblings or any two people who love each other that runs into the dead-end of pride's refusal to see the other side of the story. Pride makes our vision myopic and our capacity for empathy practically nil. And yet, as much as we know pride does us no good, we go right there next to poor Jonah and make our stand outside of the city, hoping that time will make the feeling go away.

It rarely does. The story ends so abruptly - with God giving Jonah an almighty dressing-down - that we never know what gets him out of his funk. Yet for us pride-sufferers out there, there is hope, tucked back in the verses of chapter three we heard read today. For the pride of the Ninevites is broken by the power of their collective will. As we heard read in our portion of the story, 'Everyone, great and small' followed the proclamation of the fast and put on sackcloth, a physical sign of their collective effort to defeat their shared pride.

This easily overlooked line in the story offers an essential lesson as we look to our own collective life. It says to us that change is possible when it is pursued with others. If pride is what provides the building blocks of the walls of our division, then the solidarity of and compassion for others, the willingness to forgive and be forgiven, is what can make an 'us' out of so many seemingly divergent and pride-filled 'me's'.

It is indeed true, that in a time in our nation's life when we face so many challenges, there is a profound need for us to be honest about what holds us back from the goodness we are called to give to the world. So, yes, we should talk about our pride. We should let our egos deflate a little more. We should seek to listen more than we speak, and learn more than we teach. Yet the greater gift of the faith communities at this inflection point in our national life is to speak not only of what can hold us back, but of what drives us forward.

We will never know why it was that Jesus' first disciples chose to follow him as Mark's gospel describes them, dropping their nets, leaving behind the certainty of home. Jesus had said nothing to them of note. He had performed no miraculous sign that they should go after him. Yet they went all the same.

Perhaps something in them had seen what Paul would later see in the risen Christ: that 'the present form of this world is passing away.' Perhaps they too found themselves as Paul invites the Corinthians to be, becoming 'those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions' - as no longer tied to the past and to its ways of being in the world. Perhaps in that first sight of Jesus they sensed a new thing of God unfolding in them, a grace they had longed for but only now seen. We cannot know what spurred those first followers of Jesus on, but we can recall what we have known for ourselves.

We have spent the better part of a year away from this house of prayer, a place that reminds us of the power of God's love that at some point first walked into our own lives. We have been absented by this virus from the opportunity to sit together between these walls that are saturated with prayer, imbued with the hopes of generations of God's faithful people; people who knew something of the greater power that drove them forward when their lives heard the call. We have not had the chance to linger upon the grounds of this church with one another and recall the saints of times past who had gifted us glimpses of Christ's glory.

Yet we are still present to the hope that God sets before us that we and all God's children shall be free. And absent those familiar signs and symbols of God's glory that we know on these hallowed grounds, we have yet been granted the voice of a skinny poet from California lighting the fire of our hope. So let us continue to trust that God's love can change any heart, break down any barrier, and shine a radiant light right where our life needs it most.

I pray that the coming years of this country's life will indeed be ones where we are more truly 'tied together'. But more than that, I pray, when we have healed the wounds of our divisions sufficiently enough that we can stand as one, that the 'holy mystery of love' will be with us 'as we dream together', and that we will know that the God who called us into being is all that we need to love this world anew. 'The present form of this world is passing away.' Alleluia. Alleluia.

