

# Sermon

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

**The Gospel** | Mark 1:29-39

**Date** | February 7, 2021



**ALL  
SAINTS'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Every year, I lead an inquirers class for folks who are new to All Saints' and want to learn more. I'm leading that class right now, and I have been reminded how much of a gift it is to me to hear the stories of why people choose All Saints' to be their church home. One such story was offered by someone I will call Mike - not his real name, so for all those All Saints' Mikes out there, I am not describing you.

When Mike first found All Saints' he was a sophomore at Georgia State. He'd had to navigate for the preceding years of his life what it is like to grow up as a gay man in rural Georgia. Mike's background is Baptist, and sadly, his story is all too common: one of judgement, exclusion and doubt about how much God loved him as he truly was.

The power of Mike's story for me lay in what he describes happening to him the first time he came to All Saints'. As he pushed his way through those wooden doors that lead into our beloved church building, something profound surged through him, something he felt as much as he knew. 'For the first time in my life', he said, 'I felt I belonged'. It was for Mike a moment of pure grace. Of wonder. A feeling that didn't leave him. Each handshake, each smile, each conversation, each song, each sermon, and each circle of people he encountered merely confirmed what he had already discovered: that he had come home.

I share that story with you today now nearly a year since we have been able to welcome people as they come to this house of worship for the first time. Such stories, for now at least, remain our memories. Yet they also serve as our hope, because Mike's story which is so uniquely his, is also our story. It is a story of what All Saints' means. A story of who we are.

I thought of Mike this week during a class I am taking on faith and giving. The course materials ask participants to assess whether their community is focused more on how to pay the bills, or on how to live into their vision as a church. For many churches as well as households, paying the bills is a pressing reality. Here at All Saints', we have been keenly aware of the real and present fiscal challenges before us since this pandemic began. We know that while we have been able to make savings with in-person ministries on a hiatus, there have also been significant losses of income we have incurred because of Covid. It would have been easy to have been anxious about that. Yet that has not been our story. Ours has been a story of God's abundant life among us, one that is blossoming in this place.

This canvass we invited you, the people of this parish, to ‘lift with generosity’ so we could be the force for good we know we are called to be in this place and time. You answered that call not only resoundingly but historically. This week, together we made history at All Saints’ in our pledges made for 2021, breaking the \$3 million ceiling for the first time. Might I just say that if you have yet to make your pledge for 2021, please do join us in offering your commitment to this remarkable and immensely generous church. To be sure, that history-making fact is a landmark of its own, yet it’s not the dollar amount that tells the story of this church’s hope-filled vision, it is how we are living in these strenuous times. Here are just some of the expressions of abundance that I see happening in this parish’s life.

I see you going above and beyond, over and over. Just the other week, I was amazed to hear Louisa Merchant, our Refugees Ministries Director, describe how that ministry area was gifted over \$100,000 in additional designated gifts in 2020, giving that has allowed people to receive support right when they needed it and with those gifts our friendship with families in Clarkston continues to grow in new and life-affirming ways. Our online tutoring program for kids in desperate need of support to help them learn remotely is filled with saints volunteering their time, and there is plenty of room for you if you feel called to join them.

I see you imagining new possibilities. You’ve probably figured out by now that our Music Director, Kirk Rich, is pretty nifty on the organ. What you might not know is the degree to which he continues to cast a vision for how our gifts and love for music might extend out to the city, talking recently about possibilities he is exploring for music training and performance offered to budding musicians who otherwise lack access to such opportunities.

I see you living into what a church looks like when it learns before it leads. We are learning from experts in their field like last Sunday’s Faith in the City speaker, Dr. Camara Phyllis Jones, and a steering committee for racial equity and healing is bearing witness to the mutually transformational power of partnerships with those striving for change in Atlanta, seeking out others with whom we might effectively build racial, social and economic equity. That desire for leading by listening has led me join ‘Theo’ a racial equity initiative of Atlanta Public Schools partnering with faith communities across the city.

I see you building community with tenacity and bravery, with sacred ground small groups that are holding one another in courageous spaces for conversation about race and the church. I see you being present to one another with a humility and tenderness that is allowing each to hear others’ stories with a holy and gentle proximity.

In all of this and more, we are not simply a community whose generosity is inspired by the vision we share for our life as a church. This vision of God's abundance, especially in this time of pandemic, is spilling out all over the place. People are catching God. Grace and hope are becoming contagious. To take up Mike's story one final time, and indeed the story of God's people in the scriptures, we are learning to live as if we have already come home, already made it back into the promised land, already become a beloved community that has tasted the first fruits of the kingdom of God. And so we should, for such is the nature of our hope.

As Isaiah's prophetic word reminds us today, 'The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless' for 'those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.' Words written when the people of God were held captive in exile, no longer able to farm the fields of their ancestors, no longer at liberty to be a people covenanted to one another to worship and serve their God in their own land. An ancient story, yet these are words for us today too.

No doubt, unlike our biblical forebears, our exile is not literal. We still have this land as our own, and it is by our own will that we the people of this nation are governed. Yet this long season of Covid has indeed cut us off from the embodied and storied lives we have known with one another. I love that we can continue to be and build community on a screen, but let us not underplay the significance of how much we need to be a community with one another; how much everyone across the world right now needs that basic assurance of the proximity and goodness that we find in human company.

So, we do indeed need Isaiah this morning, not only to say that we also feel this exilic moment in our lives, but to say that our hope is in the God who is not limited by the confines of this present time. For our God is the maker of all time, the one 'who sits above the circle of the earth... who stretches out the heavens'. God, the creator of the vastness of the cosmos, is the one in whom we are invited this day to place our trust, as a living hope. It's an important invitation to make for the prevailing culture around us is so accustomed to fear and sacristory, twin perils within which we so easily forget whose we are.

We hear in the gospel today how the anxiety of not having enough is an age-old human tendency. For Simon Peter, the angst is over not having enough time; a mindset I imagine many of us can relate to. After the hyperbolic description of the 'whole city' gathered at the door looking for a miracle, Mark goes on to describe Simon and the other disciples 'hunting' for Jesus, who had taken to the solitude of the desert to pray. Mark says, 'When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you."' You can almost hear the anxiety in Simon Peter's voice. Yet it is Jesus' answer that we should remember, revealing a depth of trust which is a gift all of us can be the recipients of: that God is already enough, so let's keep going.

God's grace is already all that we need. Our savior does indeed call us forward, and as one who has been invited to serve you, it is a deep blessing in my life that you are a people who hear that call and respond with a resounding 'Amen'. As we cast our visions for the kind of community we hope to become, may the God of our beginnings, the One in whom all our stories have their genesis, be our strength and our stay, this day and forevermore. Amen.