

# Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring  
Gospel Reading: Luke 3:15–17, 21–22  
January 13, 2019



First thing this new year, my family and I spent a few days on vacation at Grayton Beach, on Florida's panhandle. On one particular day, we wandered down to the beach to soak up the sun and enjoy the fact that seemingly most other folks just found it too chilly for a sea-side walk that morning. As a family, we still tend to do most things together, yet at this particular juncture, the ladies in team Mainwaring decided that it was best to retreat, whereas the boys embraced that old friend of males the world over: denial. It's not cold, it's just bracing. Consequently, while my wife and my daughter were cozy back in the cabin, my two boys and I were living into the consequences of believing that if you can just dig a big enough hole in the ground and sit in it, then all will be well. So we did.

Having spent seven years previous to Atlanta living seven blocks from the Pacific Ocean, for the three of us, there was something glorious about digging, and shaping, and tunneling that packed-snow like Floridian sand, and then standing back with great pride at the wonder we had collectively created. Yet, as it turns out, it was not the making of but the sitting in the hole that was best of all. Huddled there, the three of us arm in arm, high sandy turrets blocking out the wind, with only the relentless beauty of the crashing waves to look out onto, I felt that we could have stayed there for hours: for we had found our still point in a turning world.

I don't know about you, but there are times when the opportunity just to stop and find that still place in the midst of a busy day, or in what can sometimes feel like a busy life, is more than just pleasant, it is essential. Where are those places of stillness for you in your life, I wonder? When does life slow down just long enough for you to breathe, and to taste, and to see what life when fully attended to actually feels like?

Just to be clear, I don't offer such questions from any place of advantage or superiority. I'm not sure how you find coming back to work after several days' vacation, but I don't mind saying out loud that whilst at times the sheer variety of work that being a parish priest entails is among the reasons why I love this vocation, on returning to the block and to my email inbox this week, I was offered a rapid reminder as to why that sandy hole in the ground on a sunny Florida beach was such a welcome gift.

Here is the view from my first couple of days back: staff meetings and pastoral needs, bulletins, and budgets; our plans for a pilgrimage in the Middle East, someone else's plans for a building across the street; births and deaths, weddings and babies, senior living communities and search committee debriefs; parking, leases, and security; email scams, communications plans, grant proposals, legacy giving ideas, guest speaker asks, concert series collaborations, 360 consultant lunches, and lots and lots of reasons to say 'thank you' to Pat Kiley. O Lord my God, take me back to the beach, I've gotta dig a hole to go sit in.

And then I was reminded that I didn't need to go all the way back to Florida to find peace and tranquility, I just needed to recall that among the church's first vocations is to be at prayer for the world.

That reminder came on Friday, at noon, as I led my first of our new noonday prayer services, which are held here every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. It was beautiful in its simplicity: chairs in a circle, a sign on the sidewalk to invite people in, three rings of the bell, and a small group of us gathered in another still point in a turning world, an ecclesiastical sort of hole in the ground, you might say. Our small huddle figuratively extended its arms around one another, as for ten minutes we prayed for the church and for the world, and thanked God for God's goodness.

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634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308  
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[www.allsaintsatlanta.org](http://www.allsaintsatlanta.org)

Once it was over, I knew how much I had needed that time of prayer, yet, I also wondered how much the others in attendance might have needed it too. Looking at the faces of the people gathered, it may well have been that the ancestry of each of the four of us there was likely from four different continents. It felt a tiny bit like Isaiah's prophecy that we heard this morning, that God might gather God's people from the north and the south, 'from far away and from the end of the earth', or in our case, at least from the sidewalk on West Peachtree and North Avenue. And in that last location was the realization for me that truly mattered: that if I am in need of a still point in my overly spinning world, given all that I have access to as someone so thoroughly immersed in the life of the church, then what of those who might walk through these doors for the very first time, never before having been met within walls so thoroughly saturated with prayer as these? The realization was that we as the church are meant to be met, and meet, and become more than who we would be left to ourselves.

In many ways, the small act of daily worship at noontime here at All Saints' offers us a vision of what it might mean to follow Jesus into the waters of baptism, as Elysia, Elijah, and Peter will soon do. For it is in the waters of his baptism, as the Father proclaims that the Son is beloved and the Spirit binds earth to heaven, that Jesus meets the world, in the lives of those others being baptized by John that day. For belovedness is revealed in the meeting, not the moving apart. We come to learn the dignity of each human life before us when we draw close enough to see it, and when we choose to welcome it in and learn to listen for the wonders others know of the life of God in them.

The yoking of Jesus' baptism and Isaiah's vision of an Israel of many peoples, is a vision that shows us that the church of a baptized people is a church that is meant for plurality. Though we are one body, we are many. What's more, as we do what we can to welcome the world in, and go out to extend our welcome back to it in return, our baptized lives become places where God is welcomed, places even where God becomes, divine interstitial spaces of belonging, where in meeting the other, the sacred gift of each is received.

Yet, plurality, God's vision of belovedness where our very lives, let alone our church buildings, become houses of prayer for all peoples, is not self-evident nor easy work. I was reminded of that a week ago today, as I spent the night at Koinonia Farm, in Americas, Georgia. You probably know that in its heyday, Koinonia was referred to as a 'demonstration plot' for the kingdom of God, a place on the earth that people might look at and see what could be possible if race were something that drew us closer together rather than pull us apart. It was a radical thing sixty years ago for people of different colored skin to live and work and pray together, and it brought that community not only plenty of attention, but outright hostility and at times violent resistance to its ideals and practices.

It is sad to say, is it not, that there are still places and settings to this day where that vision of a plural kind of a world remains a radical idea, yet here we are, a church of all sorts, gathering as one, our own demonstration plot of the kingdom of God. Given that, it seems to me, especially on this Sunday of the Baptism of our Lord, when we will send out into the world three more baptized lives for the sake of that kingdom, that we should make it our work to ask one another what we might do to make more visible the kingdom of God in this place and time.

How might our lives speak more clearly of the God who never tires of speaking to us? How might your life, my life? 'I have called you by name, you are mine', says the Lord. We, with all the baptized, are called, and beloved, and met in God, and as the saints on this particular block we've got one heck of a hole in the ground to make use of and offer up to others in this corner of the kingdom. Imagine, if we flung open the doors of our life together, and let the whole world in? 'Be not afraid, for I have redeemed you', says the Lord; and you, and they, and all God's children are beloved. Amen.

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