

# Sermon

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

**The Gospel** | Mark 8:27–38

**Date** | September 12, 2021



**ALL  
SAINTS'**  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*'Wisdom cries out in the street;  
in the squares she raises her voice.  
At the busiest corner she cries out;  
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks.'*

Words from Proverbs that reverberate with particular poignancy as the nation reflects on the events of September 11, twenty years ago yesterday. On the street, in the square, at the busiest corner, at the entrance to New York city's great cathedrals of trade and finance, voices cried out.

Some of the scenes of that day are common to all of us, etched into the memory like searing scars. Images we might rather not remember, yet dare not forget, for it is in the memory that we hold the capacity for the past's redemption. We remember in order to grow. The challenge is, of course, that we remember so much.

I imagine you can recall with clarity how you felt as the reality of what had happened on 9/11 became clear. We had experienced what, tragically, so many experience around the world: the feeling that home is not completely the place of safety and security we had once believed it to be. And so, we started to look at one another differently. For some, pain turned to anger and suspicion about the intentions of those whose difference was interpreted as threat. At the same time, the horror and shock of it all was also joined by a certain solidarity, a togetherness that was felt across the country and around the world. In the pale light of grief we transcended our differences for a while and learned to see ourselves anew. Alongside all of these competing emotions, workers painstakingly unpicked the rubble at ground zero, ultimately fashioning a place for memory to dwell in the 9/11 memorial and museum. Countless initiatives for peace-building and community healing sprang up across the country. We waged a war on terror and we beat swords into plowshares. As ever, America was so many different things at once.

That's what we all saw, yet it is our individual encounters of pain and loss that shape us the most. On either side of 9/11, I served as a chaplain to an Episcopal camp in New York. A month before the attacks I had stood on the observation deck of the south tower. It was heartbreakingly surreal then, a year later to gather the camp's children and staff in our chapel on Long Island for a time of remembrance and healing. Many of them had known someone whom they'd lost, most as first responders. I cannot honestly remember now anything I said that day, or what we even did during

the service. I do remember, though, the silence, the quiet sobbing, the lives of these children trying to be present to a memory none of us could contain or understand. And in the face of that, I remember fervently listening for Wisdom to speak.

So what does Wisdom say to us on a weekend like this? To get to an answer to that question requires us to not mistake the words of our sacred texts for the vastness of the God they proclaim. For instance, if we were to take Proverbs at its word, then Wisdom would offer us a picture of a spiteful kind of God who ‘laughs at [our] calamity’ and ‘mocks when panic strikes’. To say the least, not the God we were hoping for. Yet the Bible is not God’s character reference any more than it is our manual for good living. No doubt, we all could do well in heeding James’ advice in his letter to the church, to bridle our tongues, for as he says, ‘all of us make many mistakes.’

Yet if these were the summit of what the church had to teach us - to be careful what we say because we follow a vengeful God - then the Christian faith would not only be a rather narrow and joyless path to walk down, it would make God so utterly domesticated that our religion would be little more than the sound of our own fears and foibles. The trouble with this sort of theology is not that God is too dreadful to believe in, it is that the God proclaimed within in is too small to be real. In reducing God to the size of our anxiety, we leave the past unalterable and fail to point the way to pathways of new life that are always open to us when we tap into the inexhaustible power of a gracious and forgiving God.

To take this power of grace as a real and present source of hope for the future, twenty years on from the events of 9/11, Wisdom says this: that it’s time for us to forgive.

In his book, ‘A Future that is Bigger than the Past’, Sam Wells writes that while forgiveness doesn’t change the past, it does release us from its hold on us. He says, ‘Forgiveness doesn’t rewrite history. But it prevents our histories asphyxiating us.’ He goes on, ‘In the absence of forgiveness, we’re isolated from our past, pitifully trying to bury or deny or forget or destroy the many things that haunt and overshadow...us. Forgiveness doesn’t change these things: but it does change their relationship to us. No longer do they imprison us or pursue us or surround us or stalk us. Now they accompany us, deepen us, teach us, train us...evil is real, but it won’t have the final say; death is coming, but it doesn’t obliterate the power of God; identity is fragile, but that in us that resides in God will be changed into glory.’

Taking up this theology of forgiveness that Sam Wells offers here, we may might say to one another today that it’s time to forgive the past, because it is always time to do so. Our past. Your past. The worst thing we have ever been or done does not define who we are. The sins of their fathers don’t belong to their children. Without forgiveness the past is a steel trap that we are condemned to find no way out of. Many of us carry memories of hurt and failure we no longer have any business

holding onto. What does the voice of the Spirit of God say at the street corner of our lives? Let them go. Lay those burdens down. And lift up your eyes to a larger vision of this life than the one you've been convincing yourself must have been right because you have gripped onto it so very keenly.

So, we need to forgive. Yet that is not the only challenge we hear in the gospel today. As is the case with so much of the Christian life, our *modus operandi* is not simply to sort ourselves out, as if the church were just a very publicly choreographed self-help program. Our calling, our sense of what God invites us into, deep to deep, is that once gifted by grace that we might have something to say about it to the rest of the world.

'Who do you say that I am' is Jesus' searching question Mark's gospel poses to his disciples today, and so also to us. It is clear that this is not intended as an exercise for quiet self-reflection but as a litmus test for the public life of faith. 'What does your life say about God?' is another way of putting it. And just to make us Episcopalians duly uncomfortable, this is not only what we say with our actions but also with our words. After all if you or I have discovered that grace indeed has the power to redeem us from the prison of our past's griefs and losses then what on earth would be doing in only keeping that gift of new life to ourselves? For unless I am missing something, the world is in dire need of being freed from the repetition of its own harrowing history. Either we believe God's future is bigger than the past because God does indeed widen the horizon of our loves and hopes for a reconciled world, or we had better stop singing songs about it quite so publicly.

In other words, let us be proud, unashamed, bold, audacious even in our proclamation of what it is that gives us life in a world so besotted with death. Let us celebrate our faith. For to process our banners into church as we have, singing 'For All the Saints' with joy and gusto, is not to be blithe about the pain of the past, especially on this weekend of remembrance. To the contrary, to remind one another of the wondrous diversity of this church, of the myriad of ways that we seek and serve Christ in one another and in God's world, is to offer a proclamation of the promissory note all churches have to make known: that God can redeem us from our past, from the worst angels of our nature. It says that faithful community is saturated with grace. That here we don't deal in the currency of a world set on edge by enmity and the failure to see what we hold in common, but in the currency of the kingdom of God: in the power of love to undo our insecurities and our need to show strength; in the weight of grace to sink us into deeper ground where we find our fuller selves expressed in God's joy in us; in the refining fire of forgiveness that sets us free from the confines of the past.

We celebrate the life of All Saints' today, in all of its weird and wonderful beauty and strangeness, not because we are so good at being the church, but because in a world nursing the wounds of the past two decades and of the past eighteen months of this pandemic, people need to know that there is more to this life than the sum of our fears and the limited hopes of our own power. And you are

here today, with whatever reasons have brought you to be in this place with these people, to take this good news back out into the world.

What does Wisdom say? She says that as much as the world might dwell in darkness there is no corner of our lives so filled with fear and dread to be beyond God's redeeming. She says that should we summon the courage to draw near to our neighbor that we will see in that uniquely precious human life the full vision of the glory of God. She says that God's future is always bigger than our past.

So thanks be to God for the witness of this church offered for the life of this city. May we remain steadfast in the hope that is set before us, that we and all God's people shall be free, 'Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Alleluia. Alleluia'. Amen.