

B Lectionary 23 9.8.24

Isaiah 35:4-7a; Mark 7:24-37

Focus Statement: God reaches across the gaps.

When I heard the news of the most recent school shooting in Georgia earlier this week, my first thought was how strange and terrible it is that I don't need to preach on it this morning, because school shootings happen All. The. Time. I remember when a tragedy like this would totally derail my Sunday sermon. But these days it feels like we're bombarded by tragedy—school shootings, the death of another six hostages in Gaza, continued bombing in Ukraine, landslides in California through the neighborhood of the first congregation I served. It is a strange and surreal experience to see Lester Holt open the NBC Nightly News with drone footage over familiar backyards, places I'd sat to pray with people in times of grief and celebrate in times of joy. There was so much news rattling around in my heart and head already that when I heard of the most recent school shooting I thought, if I preach on none of this and talk about God's Work Our Hands Sunday instead, no one will feel like I missed the tragedy, because we've all become so numb to tragedy.

Of course, I have mentioned it now. I have drawn our attention to the weights of the world. So now, because I pointed it out—sorry about that—you may find yourself asking, what's the point of this Sunday? Not to knock any of our well-planned and very helpful projects, but do they matter? No prayer beads are going to heal environmental destruction, no number of stamps will bring the hostages home, no packages of cookies will stop kids showing up to school with assault rifles. In a world of so much hurt, our ability to heal seems inadequate. It may be God's Work, but the capacity and capability of our hands feel

so small. It feels small, but it's not. Or rather, it is small, and that's ok. Because small steps turn out to be how healing really happens.

I was listening to a podcast this week about biomimicry. Biomimicry is the practice of learning from and imitating nature to solve human problems. In the podcast, they were talking about how ecosystems heal after a disaster, like the landslide I mentioned earlier, or a fire or forest clear cut. Biologist Janine Benyus explained that when everything else is destroyed the first life to return is tiny. After Mount St. Helens erupted, for example, the very first living thing to return was a single balloon spider, blown in on a breeze. One spider attracted other insects, and the Mount St. Helens of today teems again with life. Not the same as it once was. But, to quote from the Mount St. Helens visitors page, "Surviving plants and animals rise out of the ash, colonizing plants catch hold of the earth, birds and animals find a niche in a different forest on the slopes of Mount St. Helens."

Beyond a single spider, what does this reemergence look like? The first plant life to appear across destroyed landscapes are small, annual plants. We would call them weeds, honestly. These little plants come in and they cover the ground as quickly as they can, to keep the nutrients in place. The soil knows what it was before it was damaged, the seed beds of what it was still lay under the surface. And so, like a scab over a wound, these weeds are not the final piece, they are the protective cover so that healing can begin. Once the ground is covered and the soil softened by these little bodies and tiny roots, slightly larger plants, bushes and berries, can start to come in and take root and grow. And these larger plants provide with and shade for tree seedlings, which will eventually become the return of the

forest. Said Benyus, “it is a progression of making way, making things more and more fertile for the next cohort to come. So there’s this incredible generosity and everybody’s got their place.”

Benyus went on to explain how when we humans have tried to heal a landscape, our method has been industrial, planting trees in a row like a cornfield. Which works, but it is incredibly time consuming and labor intensive, not to mention expensive. We work and work and work and have barely anything to show for our efforts. But following the study of natural healing, a new method is starting to emerge, where foresters will create just pockets of healing, small areas of regeneration spread out across a vast swath of land. Then between these pockets they will put a post, someplace for a bird to land. That post welcomes in the ones who will gather and disperse the seeds from these small areas of healing across a wider space, and these welcoming islands, as she called them, these welcoming islands will naturally reach across to each other, healing the whole area. Regeneration done in this method requires only restoring sixteen percent of the area. Once sixteen percent is covered in these islands, the rest will take care of itself. Sixteen percent! Dear people of God, our labors can be small because all the work is not ours to do. God created a world in which if each one of us does our part, the healing grows from there. One final quote from biologist Janine Benyus, “when people ask me, how are things going? I’m like, well, I think the circles of healing are starting to grow and they’re starting to grow towards each other. And if we were to reach out our hand in the dark at this point, we might find another hand.”

“We might find another hand...” All this—plus something interesting that happened in Bible study—has me reading our Gospel text for this morning in a way I’d never heard it before. As a preacher I’ve always hated this story, because I always get caught up in Jesus initially denying the woman healing for her daughter because, “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Reading commentaries, I’m not the only student of scripture who gets caught up in this line. Scholars across the ages have spilt endless ink trying to clarify or explain away what Jesus says here. So I came into Bible study on Wednesday prepared for the same conversation. If you’ve not been to one of my bible studies, the format is simple. I read the scripture out loud, and then we talk about it. I always prepare notes on the text ahead of time, but I don’t drive the direction. Whatever questions or thoughts come to the mind of those present is where the conversation goes. And in the whole far-reaching hour of talk on Wednesday, not one person asked about the “throw it to the dogs” comment. We had a beautiful, rich, meaningful conversation on healing, both our own and the worlds, and how God challenges us to be part of that healing. As for the stories themselves, everyone was much more interested in the second healing story where Jesus put spit on the guy’s ears and tongue than they were in the conversation between Jesus and the woman. I got so caught up in the conversation that at the end, when Eileen asked if we’d missed anything I had notes on, I didn’t even bring up the difficulty of that line, because it no longer seemed relevant in a series of stories in which two people, the woman’s daughter and the deaf man, both received healing.

In Matthew’s version of this story, Jesus expanded on the dogs comment by saying he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He makes that point throughout Mark’s

Gospel as well at various points, he had a mission, and that mission was time and space bound. Which, if you think about it, makes total sense. Human Jesus was just as restricted in his ability to be more than one place at once as we are. In fact, he was more so, because we have cars and planes and Facetime, and first century Jesus had, well, his feet. He could not physically spread further than Israel until after his death and resurrection, when his ministry would spread through his followers through the work of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus said to the Syrophenician woman, this is as much time and space as I have, I am a welcoming island for these people. And she, I started to realize this week, to use a line from Benyus again, was a hand reaching out in the dark from her own welcoming island. A connection between the two that would start to fill the space between.

The Isaiah text speaks of a day when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, [when] the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.” Notice in that whole passage, the tone is passive. These things shall happen, but who will be doing the action is left unnamed. Fun bible fact for you, in scripture the passive tense is often a stand-in for God. If a thing shall happen, the implication is generally that God is the one who will be doing the acting. But there are active verbs in the passage, there is work for us. Our work is this, to “strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. [To] say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.’”

This is our work, dear people of God. This is what we are doing here today, what we are bringing our hands together in service of. Our work is not to solve all the many intractable problems of our world, but to create welcoming islands in the chaos. To create welcoming islands and then to reach out beyond those islands again and again and again, in all sorts of directions, towards others with their own islands, so that slowly, oh so slowly, the space between them can start to be filled. Thanks be to God who is at work in our small words and simple actions, reaching across and beyond our outstretched hands to fill the space between with healing. Amen.