

The Work of Your Hands

Proper 16A — Psalm 138 (centerpiece) • Isaiah 51:1-6 • Matthew 16:13-20 • Romans 12:1-8

The Rev. Robert J. Goodridge • Holy Faith Episcopal Church

We know what the news does to us.
 Turn it on for twenty minutes and something shifts...
 not just what we think, but how we feel about tomorrow.
 The furrowed brow. The tightened chest.
 We start bracing for a future we haven't even lived yet.

And here's the trap: ***we start to believe this is new.***
 That we are the first generation
 to stand at the edge of something this uncertain,
 this dark, this dystopian.
 That no one has ever had to sing
 while surrounded by gods that wanted to own them.
 But we're not standing somewhere new.

We are standing in a place formed centuries ago.
 Long before cable news... before text messages and email...
 people stood exactly where we stand
 afraid, small, surrounded by powers that seemed bigger than life itself
 and they had to decide ***what to do with that fear.***

That's why we still need these stories.
Not as history... As ***instruction.***

Psalm 138 was written by someone who had every reason to be afraid.
“Even when I walk through the middle of trouble”
 that's *not hypothetical* language.

That's someone who *knows* what trouble *tastes like*.
 And what does he *do* with it?
“In front of the gods, I will sing your praise.”

Not *after* the trouble ends.
 Not once the enemy *retreats*.
 In *front* of them.
 While they're *still watching*.
 While they *still* look... *undefeated*.

That's not denial.
 That's attitude!
 The one thing... that was always his to choose...
 and the one thing that's always *ours*.

And *underneath* the song... is a request.
 the same request... *every* generation *eventually*
has to make... *out loud... to God:*
“Do not abandon the work of your hands.”

Don't give up on us.
 Don't give up on what you started here.
 Not on me... Not on this community...
 Not on this world... broken... as it appears... in the daily news.

That request... is *old*. *Isaiah* heard it.
Peter answered it... *standing*... in the *shadow*...
 of gods he could clearly see... *with his own eyes*.
Paul built a body out of it. And this morning, we're going to ask it too.

§

Isaiah is speaking to people... who have every reason to believe...
they've been forgotten.

Exile does that.

It doesn't just *relocate* you...
 it makes you *wonder*... if *the promise*...
 ever really ***applied*** to you... in *the first place*.

And Isaiah doesn't answer with a new promise.

He answers... *with a memory.*

***“Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
 and to the quarry from which you were dug.
 Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you.”***

That's a strange comfort... on the surface.

You're afraid of the future... and Isaiah tells you... ***look backward.***

But that's *exactly* the point...

he's not *distracting* them from their fear... he's ***grounding it.***

He's saying...

Before you ask whether God will show up tomorrow...

remember that God already did.

You didn't appear out of ***nothing***...

You were hewn ***from a rock.***

Somebody *already did* the *digging*.

This is the same move the Psalmist makes without saying it out loud.

“Do not abandon the work of your hands” ...only makes sense...

if you *already* believe... your hands... were *shaped* by ***someone.***

You can't ask God... not to abandon work... he never started.

Isaiah's answer to a frightened, forgotten people isn't "*don't worry.*"
It's "*remember whose hands you're standing in.*"

And that's the first half of what it means
to hold onto attitude *when the news* wants to reshape it.
It's *not optimism*. It's *not pretending*. It's *memory*...
the discipline... of *remembering the rock*...
before the *noise* convinces you... *there never was one*.

That memory travels with Jesus *all the way north*.
Because when Jesus finally asks Peter the question...
that decides everything

"Who do you say that I am?"

he doesn't ask it in Jerusalem, or in a synagogue, or anywhere safe.
He walks his disciples two full days north,
to the district of Caesarea Philippi.

That's ancient Rome's *epicenter* for *pagan worship*
a *limestone cliff*... carved with *fourteen niches*...
holding statues of *Hermes*... *Nemesis*... *Echo*... *A temple to Zeus*.
And at the center of it... a cave-shrine to *Pan*...
where a spring *rushes out of the rock* so *violently*
the ancients called the opening "*The Gates of Hades.*"

Jesus doesn't sidestep this place... (Some scholars debate...
Whether he's standing directly in front of the shrine
or somewhere in the surrounding district... but either way...
he chooses *this* landscape... in the shadow of those 14 carved gods...
to *ask the question*. And when Peter answers...

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"

Jesus responds with rock language of his own:

“On this rock... I will build my church...”

“On this rock I will build my church...”

and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

He's not picking that phrase at random.

He's standing close enough to the actual gates the ancients feared,
answering them directly.

Psalm 138 *already knew* how this goes:

“In front of the gods I will sing your praise.”

Peter isn't improvising something new at Caesarea Philippi.

He's *doing... out loud...* in the *hardest possible setting...*

exactly what the Psalmist *already promised* to do...

Sing *in front of the gods...*

NOT... *after they've been cleared away.*

And ***“you have exalted your name and your word above everything”***

That's not poetic exaggeration anymore
once you're standing where Peter stood.

Fourteen names carved in stone,
one temple to the king of the gods,
one gate people believed led to the underworld itself —
and Peter names one name higher than all of it.

The Psalmist wrote it down first.

Peter just said it in the one place on earth
built to make it feel impossible.

§

So the confession is made.

The name is exalted, out loud, in the hardest place on earth to say it.

But a confession by itself is still just one voice...

and Psalm 138 *doesn't end with a solo.*

***The LORD will accomplish what concerns me.
O LORD, your steadfast love lasts forever
do not abandon the work of your hands.***

That's not a request for *a feeling*... It's a request for ***follow-through!***
The Psalmist *isn't asking* God
to simply keep loving him ***in the abstract***
he's asking God to ***finish something.***
To ***not*** walk away from work already started...
already in progress... already costly.

Paul answers that plea... *with an actual blueprint*
Not a ***poem*** this time... **but a body.**

***“We, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually members one of another.”***
Different gifts. Prophecy. Service. Teaching. Encouragement.
Generosity. Leadership. Compassion.
Paul isn't describing a wish list... he's describing...
what “*do not abandon the work of your hands*” looks like
when God says yes.

Because here's the thing about a body:
It isn't finished the moment it's formed.
A body *keeps growing... keeps healing... keeps being built up...
member by member... gift by gift... for as long as it lives...*

God *doesn't answer* the Psalmist's plea...
with a single miraculous rescue... and then walk away.
God answers it... by actually *building* something...
that *keeps building*
a ***body that is... itself... proof...*** the work was ***never abandoned.***

So trace it all the way through:
 the Psalmist asks God not to give up on the work of his hands.
 Isaiah tells a frightened people
 to remember whose hands shaped them in the first place.
 Peter names that God's name out loud... in front of the gods...
 at the one place built to make it feel impossible.
 And Paul shows what it looks like...
 when that name keeps building... not one voice anymore...
but a body... gift by gift... member by member... still being formed.
 That request... *is old.*
 And this morning, we're going to ask it again...
 Together... out loud... the way Peter did...
 in front of whatever gods... our own newsfeeds worship.

§

Closing — Psalm 138 (Sacred Harp Setting)

§

What you're about to hear may sound unfamiliar to some of you,
 so let me tell you what it is.
 It's called Sacred Harp singing — sometimes shape-note singing.
 It's one of the oldest singing traditions in this country
 going back to camp meetings and country churches...
 long before instruments were common in worship.
 No piano. No organ. No band. Just voices...
 Untrained... unpolished... unafraid... singing in four parts...
 facing each other in a square... as loud and as honest as they can.

The “sacred harp” isn't an instrument at all.
 It's you. It's the voice God gave you at birth.
 Nobody rehearses this music. Nobody performs it.
 People just gather, and sing — together, in the open,
 the way believers have always had to sing
 when they had nothing but their own voices and each other.
 That felt like the only way to close this morning.

Because Psalm 138 was never meant to be sung alone,
and it was never meant to be sung pretty.
It was meant to be sung
the way this woman we've talked about had to speak
in front of whatever stood against her...
without polish... without permission...
trusting that the sound of her own voice... joined to others
was enough.

So we're not going to explain this song.
We're just going to let it stand
the way faith always has
in front of whatever gods are watching.
Listen.