

Illuminations for Sunday, August 23rd 2026

Isaiah 51:1-6

Using a metaphor that might remind us of Jesus's response to Peter in Sunday's Gospel, Isaiah tells the people that they were hewn from rock and dug from a quarry in their descent from Abraham and Sarah. God promised to bless Abraham and make his offspring as numerous as the stars, and that promise has been fulfilled. Although they must remain in exile now, God will deliver them eventually. God's justice will be a light to the people, and their deliverance will come soon, Isaiah foretells: Earth may eventually wear out like a used garment and the heavens will vanish like smoke, but God's deliverance and salvation will last forever.

Psalms 138

Echoing the hope for return from exile and eventual salvation that we heard in the Isaiah reading, Psalm 138 extols God's love and faithfulness. When we called, the Psalmist sings, God answered us and gave us strength. The litany of praise goes on: Although God is on high, God cares for the lowly; God keeps us safe when we walk in the midst of trouble. The love of the Lord endures forever and will not abandon the works of God's hands.

Romans 12:1-8

Having made his case to the Christians of Rome to live and worship together in love, Paul now enters the closing chapters of this, the last of his letters. He urges the people to present their minds and bodies as a living sacrifice in spiritual worship.

not live according to the customs of this world but discern and follow what is good in the will of God, he tells the Romans. Working out a beautiful metaphor that we also hear in 1 Corinthians, he imagines the church – like our bodies – as an organism made of many parts. Every part has its purpose, and they all must function well together to make the body work. Some lead, some teach, some give, some learn, some listen; some offer compassion. All together we make up one body in Christ.

The Gospel of Matthew (16:13-20)

It is surely no coincidence that Matthew places this Gospel passage at Caesarea Philippi, then a new city built as a monument to Caesar's divine authority, with shiny temples dedicated to pagan gods and imperial worship. When Jesus asks his disciples who they say that he is – a key Gospel passage that also appears in similar form in Mark and Luke – it marks a key turning point, the moment in which Jesus first acknowledges that he is the Messiah, the son of the living God. Perhaps the disciples were already wondering about this. We are told that they worshipped him after he walked on the water and stilled the storm. But now, as Jesus and his followers begin their journey toward Jerusalem, Jesus for the first time responds affirmatively to Peter's assertion that God has revealed him as the Messiah. Jesus then declares Peter "the rock" upon which he will build the church. But still he sternly commands the disciples not to tell anyone about this. His time has not yet come.