



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 1, 2026
MICAH 6:1-8; PSALM 15; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; MATTHEW 5:1-12

A RECOVERY FROM DESPAIR

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 [The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.]"

The Saint Mark's staff celebrated our holiday party in early January as an Epiphany lunch. In keeping with the liturgical theme, our group activity invited us to select a "star word" from a scattered pile of unique words printed on a gold cardstock star. We would hold our words with guiding intention for the year ahead.

I took a little executive liberty with my star word choice by later trading it for a word not

originally in the mix. I know I didn't exactly play by the rules, so permit me to make up for it by sharing my star word with you.

Respair.

It both sounds like and is spelled like despair, but with one consonant change, it carries a radically different meaning. Respair

describes “a recovery from despair.”¹ A return to hope. Derived from the Latin, *respirare*, meaning “to breathe again.” Respair appeared only once in an Oxford English Dictionary published in the fifteen hundreds, so it is centuries out of use, but – I hope – making something of a comeback.

Respair.

It’s a word that is well suited for this season of Epiphany. This season where our ultimate star word is the Word. The Word of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ. These past several Sundays, the person and message of Jesus have been opening up for us. The Word of God, God’s gift of a star word for all creation grows ever brighter as we immerse ourselves in the ministry of Jesus.

Respair.

A recovery from despair. A return to hope.

How does the gospel offer respair for such a time as this? To help with understanding this, Paul pulls us out of Epiphany for a moment, offering a sneak peek at our Lenten journey to come.

In his first letter to the Church at Corinth his focus is the cross. Specifically, the message of the cross, which he calls foolish. “God chose

what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,”² he says. “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world – [here think of who Jesus tells us dwells at the center of God’s heart in his Sermon on the Mount] – Paul says, “God chose what is low and despised in the world. . . so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”³

The foolishness of the cross. It is utterly absurd and nonsensical to a rational, Corinthian Greek wisdom mindset.

We are an Easter people, to be sure, but we also worship a crucified God. As Paul says, “We proclaim Christ crucified.”⁴ Only this utter madness, this inverse wisdom can subvert the reigning powers and principalities of human greed and folly. The so-called wisdom of the wise. The hubris of sin.

“The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”⁵

In his sermon last week, Dean Steve said that “being present for worship is probably the most radically subversive act we can do in a time such as this.” Paul’s theology of the cross

¹ Oakley, The Very Rev. Dr. Mark, Christmas Sermon (Southwark Cathedral, London, UK, December 25, 2025). <https://shorturl.at/kIO9q>

² 1 Cor. 1:20b (NRSV)

³ 1 Cor. 1:27-29 (NRSV)

⁴ 1 Cor. 1:23a (NRSV)

⁵ 1 Cor. 1:18 (NRSV)

in many ways serves as our theological basis for the radicality of Christian worship.

When we come together to proclaim Christ crucified, we do so largely to a world that really doesn't understand it, doesn't want to hear it, but is oh, so desperate for it. Hungry for it. Starving for it.

We experience respair when we pray and worship together as a faith community inside these walls. That's the radicality of worship. And we do this to equip ourselves to go outside these walls as witnesses and servants of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to be a people guided not by despair, but respair.

Our Associate Musician and Choir School Director Rebekah Gilmore was passionate about this over lunch last Thursday, and she's granted permission for me to share highlights from our exchange with you.

She relayed how she asked the choir youth, both Senior Choristers and Schola, to unpack the claim about the radicality of worship in the dean's sermon. Sensing a teaching moment, Rebekah – Ms. Gilmore – procured a visual aid in the form of a hard-hat. Donning said hard-hat, she quoted a Christian theologian who has greatly influenced her, Marva Dawn: Marva Dawn

says this: "If we believe what we say is happening in worship, we should all be wearing hard hats."⁶

Liturgy literally means "the work of the people," the hard-hatted Ms. Gilmore and her provocative quote reminds us that worship is our labor for God. It is not for the faint-hearted.

Worship is dangerous stuff. Proper worship, and by proper, I mean truly God-oriented worship (this is not about style), will brook no quarter with the values of empire and the relentless production demands of consumer culture. It is transgressive to the so-called wisdom of the wise.

Ms. Gilmore shared images for the radicality of worship from her choir school conversation that are quite stunning in their strength and simplicity. For example, she often talks with her choirs about, and I quote, "the power of breathing together, of talking to God together; praising something beyond ourselves."

Our Choir School Director also highlighted the radically equalizing attributes of the General Confession in conversation with the youth. She said they reflected on what it means to, and her direct quote here is

⁶ Quote taken from a conversation with Rebekah Gilmore, Associate Musician and Cathedral Choir School Director, Saint Mark's Cathedral, Jan. 29, 2026.

powerful, “[C]onfess the ways we hurt others, and watch every other person in the room, regardless of status or position, do the same.”

This recalls the church’s wisdom in placing the passing of the peace before Communion, forging an opportunity for neighbor to reconcile with neighbor before partaking.

Ms. Gilmore made the radical observation that, and I quote, “Sometimes getting to the point of authentically sharing peace with someone you may be angry at is the kind of practice we all need right now.”

Pay special attention to another star word this morning. Peace. Not just any peace.

Christ’s Peace.

Remember, when we share the Peace of Christ with our neighbor, we are doing far more than saying hello. We are extending the gospel hope. We may be opening the way for healing opportunities. For respair.

Buoyed by Christ’s Peace, we turn in worship to the Great Thanksgiving, what Ms. Gilmore dubs the longest table grace ever.

Communion is all about the foolishness of the cross and what it means to proclaim and worship a broken, crucified Christ.

Still wearing her provocative hat, Ms. Gilmore made the point to her charges that “For us to eat, something must die.” Be it animal or vegetable, the cycle of life includes death.

It’s the same as we approach the altar. When we partake of Christ’s body and blood, we are giving thanks for a sacrifice that brings new life. We are reminded that our Lenten pilgrimage always gives way to Easter liberty.

Resurrection is, of course, the ultimate respair. It is the unextinguishable hope to which we return, Guided and sustained by the embodied rhythms of radical Christian worship.

A recovery from despair.

A return to hope.

Amen.



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