



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 27, 2026
EXODUS 17:1-7; PSALM 78:1-4, 12-16; ACTS 3:1-9; MATTHEW 21:23-32

NO ONE HERE BUT US CHICKENS

Acts 3:1-19 [One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you." And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.]

In her Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard told of an encounter between a Native Alaskan and a missionary priest who is seeking to share the story of our religious tradition with this man

from the hinterlands of northern exposure, albeit with a slant toward saving his soul. After hearing the priest unfurl the good news, and weighing his own response to it, the Native Alaskan asked: "If I did not know

about God and sin, would I go to hell when I die?” The priest answers in all seriousness: “No, not if you did not know.” To which the Native Alaskan responds, “then why did you tell me!”

Sometimes the whimsical story is perfect for stirring the crucible of deep wisdom. Our best authors intuitively know that.

The Acts of the Apostles is one of my favorite books of the Bible—beautifully moving, playfully whimsical at times, and, if we are honest, profoundly problematic. We hear a snippet this morning that holds this full range. A man, lame since birth, is miraculously healed, and immediately goes walking and leaping and praising God. What an image! Who is not moved by such unrestrained joy in the face of long held constraint of suffering!

We see Peter and John leaning into their newly expanded roles as evangelists for Jesus Christ, who has left the post-Pentecost apostles to continue his earthly ministry in their own right.

This Book of Acts is their sequel to the gospels, recounting the deeds of this motley band of upstarts. Their courageous witness emboldens them to be mediators of their first miracles, but they also remain humble that they are not the power behind such events; God is. If they had just stopped there...

When they blame their Jewish siblings for killing Jesus, they deliver a message that has been used by Christians for centuries to bludgeon Jews, proverbially and literally. It should cause us to squirm uncomfortably in our seats. We can do better.

The other disconcerting religious trap playing out here is that the man, lame from birth, was so born as punishment for his or his parents’ sinfulness, a divinely ordained quid pro quo promulgated by God as retributive recompense for their shortcomings. Such a tit-for-tat calculus leaves little room for a compassionate God who comes to dwell with us, or for a Christ willing to be crucified for all, and it surely complicates our understanding of disability. I’m hard-pressed to ever say a newborn baby deserves anything but the warm embrace of love, and we would do well to not use our religious imprimatur to suggest otherwise.

Three decades ago, Nancy Eisland turned this traditional theology on its head in her seminal book, *The Disabled God*, and in doing so, reframes disability through the lens of liberation precisely because the resurrected Jesus reveals himself as the Christ who makes post-resurrection appearances with all his bodily wounds in full reveal, bringing an impaired, scarred body into his glorified state—affirming non-conventional

“physicalities” rather than erasing them. The Body is richer for the diversity of expressions.

In the Eucharist, we are invited to meet and commune with this “disabled God,” crucified and risen, who inspires us to imagine new paths to inclusion, wholeness and justice.

But to do this, we must deconstruct at least three traditionally-held theologies:

- First, the “Sin/Punishment” model (i.e., disability is a direct punishment for sin).
- Secondly, Eisland declares morally bankrupt the “Charity/Pity” model—the notion that disabled folks exist primarily to inspire able-bodied souls to practice charity or compassion.
- And third, she denounces what she calls the Super-crip/Miracle model—namely, that for persons with disabilities to meet societal muster, they must either have a miracle moment which comes as divine reward for their faith, or they must exhibit superhuman feats despite their disabilities, prompting others (you and

me) to simply marvel. Our marveling is what creates value. I hope you see the folly in that.

Her use of the term “super-crip” is intentionally disturbing, meant to cajole us from our places of able-bodied comfort. All three models orient to othering and exclusion, a toxin potently at work in our world even today. Again, we can do better.

The antidote to exclusion is embrace, the sort that Jesus Christ offers by outstretching his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, so that everyone might come within the saving reach of his embrace, and invites us to do the same.¹

You should know that a year ago the Vestry adopted a long-range accessibility improvement plan, building on our commitments in recent years to guide us in improving ways we, as a church community, can welcome and embrace, rather than ignore and exclude.² We don’t do it perfectly, and it will take time, but more important than any one structural fix is a mindset that invites us to be evangelists of good news for all.

¹ Yale theologian Miroslav Volf has also written a book on this topic, which I highly recommend. Entitled *Exclusion and Embrace*, he weaves the threads of Eisland’s fresh theology into a probative account that calls for us to embody a Christ-like embrace for all, even our enemies, and find ourselves transformed by such reconciling acts.

² https://saintmarks.org/wp-content/uploads/Accessibility-Task-Force_Summary-Recommendations_2025.pdf

Today is the launch of our annual stewardship appeal, which bears the theme “Boldly Proclaim” this year. This is the season when everyone who counts Saint Mark’s as a spiritual place of connection is invited to make your commitment of financial support for the mission and ministry of this place in the coming year. I know talk of money may cause some to squirm in their seats. Some like to call it the annual beg-a-thon. I think that misses the point though.

Yes, we set an operating budget informed by the commitments we receive in the annual appeal, but I am not asking you to give to fund a budget. I am asking you something much more profoundly important in life. To share what Annie Dillard called your “unrestrained hallelujah.” Or to join the healed man in walking and leaping and praising God. You could say this is our sequel to the sequel. We have a story to write, here and now, not just read an ancient one. Indeed, we are called to Boldly Proclaim it, and we do so with all that we have and all that we are. A shared story, forged in community which strives to center itself on that holy embrace for all.

Again, Annie Dillard wisdom, at once whimsical and sublimely to the point:

“There were no formerly heroic times, and there was no formerly pure generation. There is no one here but us chickens, and so it has always been: A people busy and powerful, knowledgeable, ambivalent, important, fearful, and self-aware; a people who scheme, promote, deceive, and conquer; who pray for their loved ones, and long to flee misery and skip death. It is a weakening and discoloring idea, that rustic people knew God personally once upon a time—or even knew selflessness or courage...—but that it is too late for us. In fact, the absolute is available to everyone in every age. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less.”

This is our moment, friends. We don’t get a pass due to our foibles or our fears any more than those first disciples did when the post-Pentecost Jesus gave them his charge in their day. Giving is one way of engaging God, with gratitude and joyful, making money a little less a god in our lives.

I choose to give in community, this cathedral community in particular, because I believe the story being written here is one of unrestrained hallelujah, a holy enterprise in which I get to participate. I hope you will, too.

No one here but us chickens.