

Proper 8, Year A June 28, 2026

One thing you probably don't know about me is that I'm severely acrophobic. Terrified of heights. Which is usually no big deal, because I simply avoid climbing beyond the second rung of a ladder, and you'll almost never see me even standing on a chair. However, sometimes this presents a problem. When our boys were school-age, my hubby and I loved to vacation at Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. Now, Shenandoah National Park is full of high places—called mountains—and while we were there we often attempted to climb them. Since none of us was in the least experienced, we chose mountain paths that were already marked for us by professional rangers that would—we hoped—lead us safely up and back down again.

I remember the first time we navigated the Bearfence Rock Scramble: the name pretty well describes it. You scramble up, over, and around enormous boulders as you follow the blue arrows to the top of Bearfence Mountain. It was impossible to see the top of the mountain as I climbed, and the path was steep enough and tricky enough to absorb all my my energies, so I simply concentrated on negotiating each obstacle as I came to it, not looking down, trusting that the rangers didn't have too bizarre a sense of humor when they painted the arrows.

The view from the top of the mountain was worth the climb: a spectacular 360 degree vista of the valley below and other mountains in the distance. A place to rest, renew body and spirit, and reflect on how wonderful it was that I hadn't broken any major bones on the way up.

I remember how perfect everything seemed—until it was time to climb back down. I looked around for the arrow that would mark the beginning of our descent and my heart almost stopped beating. I walked closer, but it didn't seem to make a difference. The next arrow was painted on a rock at the very edge of the far side,

and it was pointing off into space. It seemed that the rangers were saying the only way down the 3500-foot mountain was to step off into thin air.

In this morning's first lesson, we heard (Theo/Rob) read about two prophets with conflicting messages. Now, prophets are generally viewed as intermediaries between the divine and humanity, and are tasked with communicating sacred messages, warnings, or teachings. A person who speaks God's truth to others. Sounds like a pretty good deal, right? One that might include some honor and prestige. After all, you're standing before your peers and claiming to know God's will. Sounding a warning when they stray from it.

The problem is that, usually, the prophets God sends are despised and their message goes unheeded. And it was no different here. Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as the "weeping prophet," because he relentlessly pleaded with the people of Judah to repent before their impending exile to Babylon. Hananiah, on the other hand, saw no need for repentance, proclaiming, instead, that God would intercede through wars and intimidation, breaking Babylon's power; summarily ending the occupation.

Both were adamant that they spoke God's truth. And both were willing to make their claims in, of all places, the temple courts, in the presence of priests and all the people who were present in the house of the Lord.

How do we know which one to believe? Which one is true and which is false? Jeremiah says that prophets "have always prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms." Nothing new there. You and I know that there's always another influencer, another brash voice. Instead, he says, look for those who prophesy peace. Then wait, be patient; seek validation. Because only "when the word of that prophet comes true" will it be known that the LORD has sent the prophet." Prophecy, you see, is more than a matter of volume, of opinion. And false prophecy is idolatry.

Jeremiah's stance—speaking up in such a public space and before such exalted company—took courage. About as much courage as stepping off the side of a mountain.

I think it takes a similar amount of courage to live with or support someone with mental health or addiction issues. To note the decline in your own body but push forward anyway to face each new day. To do your best at a job you don't really love but need in order to support yourself or your family. It takes courage to navigate a life that's been shattered due to someone else's poor decisions. To grieve the death of a child, a sibling, a parent, a spouse; a beloved friend. To grieve the death of hope. Of a secure future. Of love.

Over and over, it might feel like you're taking all the courage you can muster into your hands in order to walk to the edge of that mountain. Sight says that if you take one more step, you will plummet straight down 3500 feet. Faith says have the courage to take that first step, trusting that the rangers who painted the arrows had a clearer knowledge of the mountain than you could ever imagine and will, just as you have made that first step, provide another that will begin to lead you safely back down.

How do you latch on to that kind of faith? That's where God comes in.

We're going to have a Baptism today at the 10:00 service. Roman Avery Hodge's parents and godparents will be making promises and a commitment on his behalf.

And the congregation will also be making promises and commitments: to persevere in resisting evil, to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons; to strive for justice and peace among all persons. A few moments later, we will pray: "Send him into the world in witness to your love." And the congregation will respond: "Lord hear our prayer."

If you were baptised, someone once prayed those words on your behalf. And others asked the Lord to hear them. You may have been too small to even walk or talk, let alone understand them at the time. But now—now is another story.

Do you hear them? Have you understood their power? Felt their call? These words are not-very-subtle reminders that a baptism is not simply an occasion to gather the family and take lots of photos and maybe eat cake. Instead, it's the beginning of a charge: for the about-to-be-baptised individual as well as for all present to look beyond the candles and hymns and bring that Good News into every interaction, every day.

And after the Baptism, something occurs that might seem a bit of an afterthought. The presider takes blessed oil—chrism— makes the sign of the cross, on the forehead and states: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.”

Did you know that early Christians were known as “followers of the Way” because they felt it encapsulated a way of life—a transformative path that defined every action, decision, and relationship of those who walked in it? That’s you. That’s me. That’s our painted blue arrows. Our starting point, our forever reference. Our assurance that, because we now belong to Christ, we can never be truly alone or lost or unloved.

And once you start walking that path you might start noticing small miracles and moments of joy, noticing the ways that others are using their gifts to enrich, encourage, and enlighten others: through gardening, baking, cleaning, organizing, offering rides, making copies, leading groups, moving chairs, lending books, writing letters, offering hugs; listening without giving advice. Gifting a printer. What about you?

Might you want to:

- Continue to live your life with integrity?
- Understand that God's creations are sacred and act accordingly?
- Offer the same mercy you give to others to yourself as well, knowing that you are human and vulnerable to error?
- Try to see God's essence in everyone you encounter?
- Help your neighbor when they least expect it?
- Bring your children or grandchildren to church school, to learn from Mr. Carl how fully God's love surrounds them?
- Present a child—or an adult—for baptism?

In the short two-sentence, 84-word gospel of Matthew this morning the word “reward” was used three times. Because that word sounds a little too “prosperity gospel” for me, I’m going to suggest that we look at it through the lens of the kingdom of heaven instead.

When you welcome Jesus into your life, you welcome God. Welcoming a prophet or a righteous person brings the kingdom of heaven a little closer into being. And giving even a cup of cold water to a child showers blessings on us all.

I am not a prophet and neither, likely, are you. But by having the courage to follow a prophetic voice of peace, by following Jesus, we can make a world of difference. That’s why the kingdom of heaven is like you when you walk in witness to God’s love. The kingdom of heaven is like me when I see and serve Christ in others. And the kingdom of heaven is within us when we have the faith to step out into the thin air of the breath of life itself.

Amen.

CSB

6/28/26