

Sermon Text for January 19, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 40:3-5 and Matthew 18:1-5 ***“Lifting valleys and leveling mountains”***

There used to be a TV show that was called kids say the darndest things, and the premise was to get kids on TV to talk about serious topics and hear what they had to say, and normally you could count on them saying some pretty comical things. We’ve had experiences with kids saying things that are both comical and deeply true at the same time. I’ve told you about that kid in my dad’s Christmas pageant when he was a pastor. He was the angel Gabriel and he had rehearsed his lines and had them pregnant, Greetings favored one you will conceive in your womb and bear a Savior. Not difficult lines, but you had to get them right, so he practiced and practiced, the day of the pageant came and the angel Gabriel came on stage, completely forgot his lines, there was that awkward silence until he finally mustered up the courage, looked at Mary and said: Zap, you’re pregnant.

This week a member of our church took her child to kindergarten day with another upcoming child from the church and as they walked into the brand new just built children’s wing an animal must have died up in the ceiling tiles because it smelled absolutely awful and the one child who was being brought with the other parent said loud enough for everyone to hear: that’s okay, it doesn’t smell nearly as bad as when my dad has gas. That’s our kids.

Some of you remember the children’s sermon right here when I took a cup from the communion tray and asked the kids what was in this little cup and one child raised their hand, Molly Neumann, and said: Medicine? Our family has a story of living in NYC before I was born and one of my brothers was assaulted and the police asked him was the person who did this to you black or white? My brother looked at him and had no idea what he was talking about. He hadn’t learned that there was a difference between black and white, it isn’t until we get older, no longer children, that we learn the difference from our families, from society, from culture. Certainly not from God who created us from the same mud and breathed life into us equally. The differences that we see are a result of valleys and mountains being built up or torn down.

Jesus says in our Scripture today that we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we change, and change is the key word and it is probably the most threatening word that anyone can hear, but he says we have to change, there is no alternative, and become like a child. But what it is about a child that makes him or her fit for the kingdom of God and what it is about adults that

make us unqualified unless we change and become like children? See if you can identify the character trait that Jesus lifts up as critical in order to the kingdom of God. Let's read.

READ

Our Isaiah Scripture is one that almost gives us a road map as to what we are called to do in order to see and be a part of the kingdom of God. So I am operating from the premise that we all want to see and be a part of the kingdom of God. If we do not, then that's something altogether different. There is a kind of if you do this, then this will happen progression in these verses. We see in vs.4 that when every valley is lifted up and every mountain laid low, then, look at vs.5, then the glory of the Lord will be revealed. These verses identify what we are called to do in order to experience the glory of the Lord.

When valleys are lifted and mountains laid low then the glory of the Lord will be revealed. As someone who has hiked a bit of the Appalachian trail a smooth, level path always sounds ideal, and as someone who in Isaiah's time would have known steep rocky mountains and low lying valleys that were hard to get in and out of, well, that sounded pretty good. But when we take what Isaiah states and apply it to the people of that day we know that Isaiah often complained about how the widow, the lowest of the low in the society, was facing a mountain when confronted with keeping her husband's property. Often, her voice was not heard and so it was a valley she had to climb out of, which she was not able.

Isaiah here is not talking about hiking, he is talking about justice within society and culture where he identifies that there are those who are unheard and those who face injustice within our culture and society and it has been that way for generations and it is up to us to make the playing field level. We are called to lift valleys as we see the rate of incarceration for black males at a tragically disproportionate level as opposed to white males. This a mountain that we, as a society where white male voices are the loudest and strongest, and greatest, have created and so we must level it. Isaiah would have understood that. The current state of our society and our country and our nation is that there are mountains and valleys that have been created in the housing market, in the criminal justice system in jobs that are higher level, in education. All across the board people like us have made valleys for others to reside in and built up mountains and barriers that only we have the key to cross.

So what role can the church play in leveling the playing field? That was the question that MLK asked when he did his work. He understood that the churches job was to level the playing field in issues of race and also in issues of poverty and wealth distribution. That second one was

actually what he was working on that probably got him killed more than the work that he did in race relations.

I have talked to many people who see this new chapter in our nation that is going to begin on Monday as a time that we might be able to move closer to Jesus, as a nation. But a nation moving closer to Jesus is less about athletes praying together on the field, or celebrities or government officials talking about Jesus and more about our nation feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, welcoming the stranger the immigrant, visiting those in prison and the sick. A nation comes closer to Jesus when it knocks down the mountains that it has created to keep some people in power and keep others out as well as lifting up the valleys where generations of our citizens see themselves in poverty and targets for crackdowns on crime. That is how our nation becomes greater.

It is interesting that our second Scripture Jesus is asked how does one become the greatest. Did you see that. In Mark it is much less subtle, in Mark 9 we see the disciples arguing and Jesus walks in on their argument and they are wondering that same question, which one of us is greatest and what is it that makes us the greatest? So the question is what does greatness look like? If you were talking about sports how can you not see Tom Brady as the greatest with all of his Super Bowls and accomplishments, in basketball how can we not see LeBron James and his championships and most points scored. We have objective data that we can use to say who is the greatest. But when it comes to being a disciple, how do we measure who is the greatest? Jesus has a way that he shares with us in these verses.

He takes a child and says unless you change and become as a child, and then in vs.4 tells us what it is about that child that makes it great is his humility, unless you become humble like this child you can't even enter the kingdom, much less be in the conversation of the greatest. None of them had that humility so they weren't even in the top 10 until they took on the humility of a child. We may ask but what kind of impact does humility have on the world? That might be well and good in our interpersonal relationships, but certainly we aren't talking about a President, or a secretary of defense, these are people that have to be strong and great and show their greatness. Humility can't really have any impact in the world we live in, can it?

Over history the church has been able to bring about righteous change in society and culture so that valleys are lifted up and mountains are laid low. That is our responsibility. But churches have also been complicit in keeping and maintaining the mountains and valleys. Sunday morning remains the most segregated time that we experience as a nation. But our

Scripture tells us to break down the dividing wall between men and women, rich and poor, black and white through humility.

We read in Philippians 2:3, which should be our calling card, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” This is greatness when we regard others as greater than us. Jesus changed the world in his humility, so yes, we have a living example of how the world can be changed not from might making right, but as Philippians tells us Philippians 2:6-10.

This is how we become the greatest, by lifting up valleys in which others find themselves, and tearing down mountains that we have been perched upon for generations. But we are like the disciples wondering what it means to be the greatest and who just might be the greatest. That’s what the world cares about and so we think the church and we as individuals ought to care about it as well. Look at what happens in the next chapter in Matthew, the disciples are confronted with children and their parents and they yell at them and tell them to go away, and this is right after Jesus tells them to become like children and even to welcome children in his name and then they will be welcomed into the kingdom if they do so.

The disciples were so on the wrong track in their admiration of and quest of what they considered to be greatness that it was questionable whether they really understood the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed and, in particular that its basis lay in God’s free grace and lives of humility. The disciples thought of greatness in terms of power and position while Jesus thinks of greatness in terms of righteousness. Our job is to lift up valleys and bring down mountains, and it is hard to do when we have benefitted from the valleys and the mountains our whole lives and for generations.

Only by willing to empty ourselves and become a nobody can we gain prominence in the kingdom of God. May God bless us and keep us so that we can see ourselves as disciples seeking to raise up valleys and lower mountains. Amen.