

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

December 15, 2024

**WORDS for the
BEGINNING:
Do the Good That
is Yours to Do**

Dr. Jo Forrest

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When we stare at a burned-out building that we'd called "home" or remove a ring from our finger after a failed relationship, that moment in time sears as an ending. In addition to the sorrows that well up, wide-ranging questions weigh us down.

Do we possess the energy to rebuild? Will we risk the heartache by loving again? If we do nothing, will we sink deeper? Is there anything to do?

Our lives of faith remind us that while we rest in God's hands, all these endings become beginnings. The ancient Israelites wept at the sight of the ruins of their Jerusalem homes. They finally admitted that they'd placed too much faith in leaders who postured as heroes -- whose promises proved to be empty. And by putting their trust in them, the Israelites opted out of doing for one another what they could.

Regardless of whether they'd been deceived or secretly wanted someone to relieve them of their duties, they faced an ugly ending.

The prophet Isaiah scolds with biting clarity. As we pick up in chapter 58, he'd just lambasted them by listing one selfish act after another. He pauses, takes a breath, and continues with a measure of pastoral calm.

Patient God,

We know that you are constantly speaking to us.

Through music, scripture, nature, and relationships.

You make yourself known again and again.

*Gather us into your sanctuary so we may
quiet the noise in our heads.*

Speak to us as only you can, amen.

Isaiah 58:9-12

If you remove the yoke from among you,

the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness

and your gloom be like the noonday.

The LORD will guide you continually

and satisfy your needs in parched places

and make your bones strong,

and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water

whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;

you shall be called the repairer of the breach,

the restorer of streets to live in.

For nearly 900 years, since construction began in 1163, Notre Dame stood as a gravitational center of Paris. In this sacred place Mary Queen of Scots was married, Joan of Arc beatified, and Napoleon crowned. Often called “the soul of France,” it is ground zero from which all distances in the nation are measured. Pilgrimage trails across Europe begin and end there.

In 2019, plumes of smoke and ash drifted over the Seine River as it burned. At that moment, people across the world wept, realizing how much Notre Dame meant regardless of nationality or faith.

That’s when people began to ask, in the long arc of history, what would it say about us, if that were its last day? While the ashes still smoldered, they shared a promise to restore within five years what took 200 years build.

Last weekend, Notre Dame reopened for worship. Beyond Paris, the reopening underscores that disasters are surmountable, that some good and true things endure — that humanity may not yet have lost touch with its best self. Over these last five years, those who reported on the repairs wrote of witnessing a kind of miracle.

French oak trees were selected and tree-by-tree matched to the contours of the ancient beam it would replace. Then each

beam was carved to duplicate the peculiarities of its original hand-tooled silhouette.

Woodworkers replicated the medieval carpenter's mark, what we might consider their tattoo, into the fresh beam even though they are visible only to those who worked in the soaring heights of the attic.

Even the self-described agnostic writers considered the work as "faithful." Blacksmiths who fashioned the implements noticed at the emotional bonds formed between the carpenters and their newly crafted axes.

Forests that gave up trees were replanted.

Notre Dame's nearly \$900 million restoration was raised by donations from a few Paris billionaires and some 340,000 other donors. Many gifts were less than the equivalent of \$50.

Over 2,000 artisan – carpenters, stone cutters, gold leaf sculptors, and blacksmiths – plied their trades to restore her as originally built.

One of the construction leaders said, "In France, as in America, those who go into manual trades today tend to be considered failures by the elites. Notre-Dame has reminded everyone that such work is a path to dignity and excellence."

Another leader who periodically inspected the work claimed, “I can’t recall ever visiting a building site that seemed calmer, despite the pressure to finish on time, or one filled with quite the same quiet air of joy and certitude. When I quizzed one worker about what the job meant to her, she struggled to find words, then started to weep.”¹

It takes this kind of an ending for humans to discover God’s beginning.

Time and again we find *our best selves* in the face of destruction. It is *our* – emphasis on *our* collective best selves – yours’s and my best. God invests in each of us talents and capacities. As a unique creature, each of us possesses the capacity to contribute in a way no other person before or since. And when gathered, we experience God’s creative hand uniting our work, one to another, past to present, at this moment in time and into the future.

Our faith history persuades us to trust in this. When the Israelites saw their homes and communities in rubble, Isaiah points to explicit tasks for each to do: Stop pointing your finger. Hold your tongue from speaking evil.

¹The weekend and week following Notre Dame’s reopening, the New York Times and Washington Post published extensive articles marveling at the human investment of labor, talent, emotion, and money. This article in particular peaked by interest: Michael Kimmelman, “A Miracle: Notre-Dame’s Astonishing Rebirth From the Ashes,” *The New York Times*, December 5, 2024, [Notre-Dame Reopens in Paris After a Fire. It’s Astonishing. - The New York Times](#)

Although not part of our reading, this moment marks the end of any grand illusion that someone else is to blame for their demise. No one will swoop in as the hero to rebuild. Each person is to do their part.

Then the prophet reminds them of their basic values by doing the ordinary tasks that build an enduring society: Go feed the hungry. Satisfy the needs of others. *Every* single Israelite is to do what they can in their own way. *If* they do as prescribed, God will magnify their efforts, and *then* ancient ruins will rise as a place for their children and children's children to thrive. Isaiah describes an ethical world in which their choices have consequences.

He frames caring for the people with the simplicity of “if and then” to remove any barriers to understanding that what we do as individuals creates collective flourishing.

There is a danger in the casual reading of his *if/then* statements as some sort of vending machine theology: if I put this quarter in, I'll get a gumball in return.

If I drop off food for SHIM, then I fulfilled my task. Not only may I expect a divine reward, I can go back to my life. That's bad enough and gives way to even more misleading ideas. If I'm too busy, I may send a check or text to give cash. Not so bad, but without my involvement I may never grasp the humanity of the person who shows up hungry.

Doing something with a “check the box” intent also shields me from the ongoing systems of injustice that keep people food insecure. I may become detached. Indifferent.

Let’s take it a step further.

An *if/then* vending-machine theology may distort our view even further. If I see that you are in need, it’s easy for me to imagine that you must have not done something or maybe you did something that is bad. If your child lacks access to health care or you cannot maintain a job, even if your car broke down and you lack the funds to repair it... you still shoulder the blame.

Isaiah restores everyone’s accountability within the collective of the community. God’s promise to make your bones strong and to raise foundations for many generations demands “you” (plural), everyone is to do what they can. Everyone has something to do.

Let’s examine Isaiah’s prophecy in a modern-day context.

If you’ve not read or heard of David LaMotte’s book *You Are Changing the World: Whether You Like It Or Not*, I commend it to you. In a time-crunched schedule, you could skim the highlights by watching his TEDxTalk which is less than twenty minutes.²

² [Why heroes don't change the world | David LaMotte | TEDxAsheville](#)

Lamotte debunks the myth of the hero narrative as the successful way to make change or to begin again after catastrophe. We celebrate the stories – usually fablelike – of someone extra wise, brave, or strong to become the hero. Such characteristics form a common movie plotline regardless of whether a rom-com or action thriller.

In politics and across all forms of organizations and corporations we desire such heroes. There's an illusion that if we put the right person at the top, they possess everything the rest of us lack. They will wave a wand, right the wrongs, and we all win. Or at least of those us who support this hero will win.

Lamotte bluntly states: Heroism is way overrated. He describes another narrative, not so popular, but truer than any hero story. It takes broad populations working together to solve large scale problems and chart new beginnings.

Case in point, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Most often the story is taught by the heroic action of Rosa Parks almost seventy years ago this month. She refused to give up her seat in a "Whites' Only" section.

Parks is often portrayed as an older, tired woman who'd just had enough. At the time, she was 42. That's young from my perspective. And, December 5, 1956 was not her first run-in with discriminatory bus rules. She worked for twelve years as a civil rights activist.

The NAACP and the Women's Political Council lobbied to change the bus system, hire Black drivers, and end the practice of driving away from Black riders who'd already paid a fare. They'd been planning and working for more than nine years.³

Yes, let's celebrate Rosa Parks' bravery *and* also the thousands of people in Montgomery who did what they could to build a more just society.

We like to tell hero stories. Someone who faced a crisis and had that once-in-a-lifetime gift to save us. Hero narratives deceive us into thinking that ordinary people do not change the world.

Gathered in Advent, we tell the story of a new beginning and the arrival of our savior...the Christ child.

Jesus never becomes a hero. If anything, his followers desert him, and he's publicly labeled a failure. As God in the flesh, in his living and in his rising from the ruin of death, he models what ordinary people can do for one another. Each day, he would do something for another. He inspired others like himself, who possessed no earthly authority or stature to do the same.

His followers believed and led the change that brings us to today.

³ <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/montgomery-bus-boycott>

So we are to do what he tells us to do. See another person as God's beloved. Feed them. Welcome them to your dinner table. Take a risk to defy what others say is impossible with daily acts of doing what you can. His story is our story composed by generations of individual acts of love.

Now it comes to us. What will we do?

I don't know about you, but I ask myself that question and far too often at 3am. I am so aware of all the things I cannot do or am no longer able to do. I can hear my Depression-era grandmother who relied upon faith as she built a life from the ground up say, "we make do as best you can."

None of us can do it all, but when each one of us does what we can, we become like those artisans who restored Notre Dame from the rubble.

When we do what inspires us, when our lives reflect our values, and when we do something for the good that will long outlive us, we've built a community pleasing to God. That's a very fine beginning.



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