

**August 21, 2022 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Isaiah 58:9b-12, Luke 13:10-17**

**Grace and peace, freedom and mercy, to you, beloved community of Christ. Amen.**

**Like rains in parched places, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.**

As much as I use my weather app and generally keep track of the forecast,  
the rains this week often took me by surprise.

Maybe you too!

A few of these days, it would look cloudy for hours.

I'd resolve that maybe it was just a cloudy day and go on about my way...

and then the rains would come,

soft at first, then picking up,

sometimes with surprising strength, even lightening and thunder.

In some seasons I'd have reached for my umbrella, or grabbed my rain coat.

But this week I never got them out.

More than a few times I just got wet, enjoyed the sprinkles, trusted I'd dry.

When the rains got particularly heavy, I went inside.

I watched the rain with awe, like a child, it was lovely.

I savored the sound of the rain in ways I haven't done for years.

I slept well when it came at night, serenading us through our slightly open window.

Anyone else enjoy this week's rain?

The land did, the gardeners and farmers did.

The weeds in our yard did—they are growing like...weeds!

The critters who use our in the bird bath did.

Like rains in parched places, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

**This sabbath we are blessed by two passages both about sabbath.**

They are vivid descriptions of what God's sabbath can look like,

can feel like,

can produce.

**First, just briefly, the images of Isaiah,** from a time (500-some years before the birth of Jesus)

when the captivity was over, and yet they were struggling,

their dreams of freedom were not yet realized,

the city and temple were not yet rebuilt,

interactions were strained,

so these words of the prophet are aspirational:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free? ....

If you remove the yoke, the weighty burden, the pointing of fingers, the blaming, the speaking of evil.

If you offer your food, sharing your resources with those who hunger, who thirst,

THEN your light shall rise.

The Lord will guide you continually, satisfy your needs in parched places, make your bones strong.

You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Repairers of the breach, restorer of streets to live in.

Dear ones, in our strained times, when hopes can be aspirational,

let these words wash over you, renew you this Sabbath morning.

You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

**And then let us turn to the Gospel, another Sabbath scene.**

Using a structure familiar to some, I'm unpacking this passage with the prompts I wonder, and I notice. Feel free to grab your bulletin if that's helpful.

**I wonder about that woman who has been bent over for 18 long years, nearly two decades.**

I notice: that's a long time to look at people's dusty feet, to scarcely make eye contact.

That's a long time to live bent over,  
perhaps with an aching neck or back,  
surely fatigued, maybe isolated,

I notice that this woman is vulnerable in so many ways, she is vulnerable.

**I notice that this woman doesn't seek out Jesus,** no, just the opposite: Jesus notices her, seeks out her, right in the middle of teaching, he sees her.

You are set free, Jesus says.

I notice how Jesus lays hands on her.

I wonder what that felt like, if she was okay with it.

We read: "Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God."

I wonder what it felt like to go so quickly from bent over to standing straight up,  
how different the world must have looked.

I notice the woman's response to Jesus' mercy is praise. It is pure praise.

**And I notice this synagogue leader, indignant, irate:**

"You shouldn't have done that Jesus, not on the sabbath."

A power struggle, if ever there was one!

I wonder if he's fearful for the order of this community.

I wonder if he worries about breaking the sabbath laws, or his rigid interpretation of the sabbath laws.

Or maybe he worries about the raised eye-brows of the neighboring synagogue leaders,  
about his own reputation.

I wonder if he's mad that Jesus did this,  
or guilty or ashamed that he didn't do it, or couldn't do it, or wouldn't do it.

**I notice that Luke writes, "The Lord answered him,"** not just saying "Jesus answered him," but "THE LORD answered him," that steps it up, doesn't it?

Oh, and that question, that response, so pointed:

"You untie your ox, your donkey, you lead them to water even on the Sabbath,  
why not liberate this woman?"

Essentially, do you value your donkey's needs, their freedom, more than your sister's freedom, her needs?

And I notice how the crowd rejoices.

**Friends, there's a lot here in this sabbath passage, isn't there?**

I can see myself in each of the roles; can you see yourself?

Sometimes I'm the woman, quietly bent and in need, healed, then praising.

Sometimes I'm the one holding onto old routines,  
clinging to the way I think it's supposed to be, caught in a power struggle,  
with all the emotions that come with this rigid thinking.

Sometimes I'm ready to tip the tables, scrap the rules, do the healing, get on with it.

And sometimes I'm part of the crowd, taking in the wonder of it all.

**Mercy, healing, liberation,** these are the sabbath themes that run through Luke's telling of the Good News, and this Sunday's gospel is no exception.

Early in Luke's gospel, in another synagogue, on another sabbath, Jesus lays out his mission.

He says, I've come to bring good news for the poor,  
release for the captives, sight for the blind, to let the oppressed go free.

**Jesus is all about mercy, all about healing, all about liberation.**

And we, dear friends, are called to enact, indeed, embody this mercy, this healing, this sabbath liberation.

Not to simply keep things orderly, or to make and follow nice rules—  
that would have left this woman waiting until Monday, if ever.

Not to offer platitudes that sound good but lack depth or courage.

But to follow the way of divine mercy,

to opt for liberation,

to prioritize healing,

even when it gets messy, when it's a ways beyond our comfort zone, or not at the ideal time,

because that's where Jesus hangs out,

that's how he rolls... and we follow Jesus.

**As we baptize Mira this sabbath, she is baptized in the waters of promise.**

Like rains in parched places, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail,

God's love will always hold her,

God's care will never forsake her.

And, as she grows, by the power of the Holy Spirit and the call of Jesus,

she, like all the rest of us,

will be part of embodying this divine mercy, this holy healing, this essential liberation.

**Dearly beloved, this sabbath, this week, the tension of today's gospel is before us:**

the one desperately trying to hold onto the order as he understands it,

and Jesus' merciful, liberating response to see the woman, to heal her, to free her.

From all different angles, going about our daily lives, and within the church, this tension plays out.

**As we navigate these days, Mira's baptismal promises, are our promises as well:**

Like rains in parched places, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail,

God's care will never forsake you.

God's love will always hold you.

We, too, can be part of this divine mercy, this holy healing, this essential liberation.

Praise be to God. Amen.