

God with us. A sanctuary in troubled times

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 8:9–14; Psalm 103; Luke 13:10–17

Mark Jeffrey, Methodist lay reader, August 24 2025

A world in fear and need

We live in a time of profound uncertainty. In the past two weeks alone, Gaza faces a looming ground offensive, with humanitarian aid severely restricted and widespread starvation threatening thousands. Deadly attacks in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo have displaced communities and deepened fear. Haiti's gang violence has escalated, leaving over 1.3 million displaced, with aid efforts underfunded. These stories are not just headlines—they are cries for sanctuary, justice, and healing. Into this world, Isaiah, the psalmist, and Jesus speak with clarity and hope.

Isaiah 8:9b–14 – God with us in a time of fear

Isaiah speaks during a time of political conspiracy and fear in Judah. The temptation was to trust in alliances and military strength rather than in God. Today, misinformation and conspiracy theories abound—from climate denial to geopolitical manipulation. Just this week, conspiracy theories about wind farms and climate change resurfaced in political discourse. Isaiah's message is timeless: "Do not fear what they fear... but let the Lord be your dread." In other words, don't let fear drive your decisions—let reverence for God guide you.

Reflection

Where do we turn when the world feels unstable? Are we driven by fear or anchored in faith?

Psalm 103 – God's mercy and healing

David's psalm is a song of remembrance and praise. It lists God's benefits: forgiveness, healing, redemption, love, and renewal. On World Humanitarian Day, the UN honoured 383 aid workers killed in the line of duty last year. These individuals embodied Psalm 103's vision of mercy and justice—bringing healing to the oppressed and hope to the forgotten. One story featured Pedro Matos, a former space engineer who now serves in Gaza with the World Food Programme. He said, "Our work is largely invisible," yet it reflects the heart of God. Pedro Matos traded a career in space engineering for the frontlines of humanitarian aid, driven by a desire to do more than just make maps—he wanted to be the one using them to save lives. After joining the World Food Programme (WFP), he found himself coordinating emergency responses in crisis zones from Mozambique to Ukraine, often under fire or in the aftermath of natural disasters. His work has taken him to places like Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee camp, where he's helped improve living conditions for hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Despite the danger, Matos says the most profound impact comes not from what happens to aid workers, but from witnessing the suffering—and resilience—of others.

Feeding millions daily and navigating logistical chaos akin to "moving an entire government," Matos emphasizes that humanitarian work is far more complex and expansive than most imagine. From distributing cash to war survivors in Ukraine to helping rebuild communities in Yemen, his efforts reflect the invisible yet vital role aid workers play. The WFP's Nobel Peace Prize in 2020 helped shine a light on crises often overlooked, and Matos sees his mission as giving voice to the voiceless. His biggest takeaway? That in the face of tragedy, people—regardless of background—are fundamentally good and willing to help.

Reflection

Remember and praise God's goodness, even in hardship. How have you experienced God's mercy? How can we extend it to others?

Luke 13:10–17 – Jesus sets us free

Jesus heals a woman who had been bent over for 18 years. He sees her, calls her forward, and sets her free—on the Sabbath, challenging religious norms. In a world where rules and systems often overlook the suffering, Jesus' compassion is revolutionary. His healing is not just physical—it's social and spiritual.

This week, stories of compassion emerged.

A Canadian Mountie saved a senior's life simply by sitting and listening. In Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, a Canadian Mountie named Constable Lloyd responded to a routine well-being check requested by an out-of-town family concerned about their elderly father, whom they hadn't heard from in months. Upon arrival, the officer found the senior living in unhealthy conditions and initially resistant to help, insisting he was fine.

Rather than leaving, Constable Lloyd sat with the man for over an hour, patiently listening and building rapport. Eventually, the senior agreed to go to the hospital. Doctors later discovered he had been bleeding internally and would likely have died within 24 hours without medical intervention. The man later returned to the RCMP office to express his gratitude, sharing that the officer's compassion and persistence saved his life. Superintendent Bruce Singer praised the officer's actions, saying, "Despite being met with hesitation and resistance, Cst. Lloyd stayed present, didn't rush, didn't retreat, but instead listened, showed compassion, and built a connection that ultimately saved his life."

In Togo, UN health workers brought digital tools to remote villages, treating children for malaria and malnutrition. These acts mirror Jesus' ministry—seeing the unseen, healing the hurting, and challenging injustice.

Reflection

Who are the "bent-over" people in our lives? Who needs to be seen, called forward, and set free?

Living as people of sanctuary and freedom

We should be encouraged to trust God amid fear. Resist panic and conspiracy. Anchor our hope in God's presence. Remember God's mercy – like the psalmist, cultivate gratitude and praise. Act with compassion – be like Jesus: notice those who are hurting, challenge unjust systems, and bring healing.

For an international congregation such as ours, this might mean supporting displaced people in Geneva, volunteering with refugee aid organizations, and speaking truth in love in divisive conversations.

God with Us

God is with us—not just in theory, but in action. He is our sanctuary in troubled times. He is our liberator, setting us free to stand tall and rejoice.