

**SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 5:1-12**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 3“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD

**FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Micah 6:1, 6-8**

Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice....6“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” 8He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? This is the word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD

## “Blessed”

After having been with Jesus in his baptism and then the call of his disciples, today we join him as he begins to teach what it means to live as God’s people. It will come to be known as his most important sermon, sometimes called the Magna Carta of the Christian Faith, the most priceless deposit of religious insight known to humankind.<sup>1</sup> He chooses the side of a mountain from which to deliver his lesson, a most appropriate place for throughout all of Jewish history, from Moses to Ezekiel to the psalmists, God has spoken critical things to God’s people from a mountain.<sup>2</sup> So, let us imagine that we are with the crowd on this momentous day, finding a soft spot of grass from which to listen to Jesus’ first address, his Sermon on the Mount.

He begins, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*” “*Blessed are those who mourn,*” “*Blessed are the meek,*” “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst*”, “*Blessed are the persecuted.*” What? Really? What in the world is he saying? What is blessed about being poor, or mourning or hungering? Are we in the right place? These blessings, called beatitudes, sound upside down, completely contrary to the realities of our world and lives. Blessedness has to do with being rich and famous. It means being well-fed and feeling good, getting our own way, playing it safe and compromising, right? The realities in our world are “might makes right”, “beauty, power and wealth wins”, “violence speaks”. As poetic as they are, these beatitudes frankly sound well, crazy, impossible, nonpractical.... until that is, we consider that they are not commands. They are not imperatives. They are not calls to action to become poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek, and so forth. They are instead indicatives, promises, prophetic declarations, descriptions of the way things are....in the Kingdom of God!<sup>3</sup> Of course, they do imply that people who have responded to the coming of the realm of God in a positive way will manifest these behaviors.

The “blessed” ones, the *makarios* in Greek, are people who are “happy”...not giddy happy, but maybe more having a quality of life ...a “contentedness”, “hopefulness”, a sense of “security”, “wholeness”. Rev. Carla Pratt Keyes says that the blessed are “*the kind of people*

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<sup>1</sup> William Quick. [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002535/the\\_greatest\\_sermon\\_ever\\_preached](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002535/the_greatest_sermon_ever_preached). (accessed 1-27-23).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Holmes. “*Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture.*” In: Joel Green, Thomas Long, Luke Powery, et al; Connections. Year A. Vol 1 (Louisville: WJKP; 2019), 221. (accessed 1-27-23).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Allen. “*Homiletical Perspective. Mt 5:1-12*” In: David Bartlett, Barbara Brown Taylor, eds; Feasting on the Word. Yr A, Vol 1 (Louisville: WJKP;2010), 311.

*who can go on Jesus' adventure, taking risks, having the courage to defy the odds, refusing to play it safe. She takes this from the Spanish "bienaventuranza" which means "a good adventure to you". They are ones who have gotten over themselves in significant ways, past not only the worldly desires for power or prestige or possessions, but also our basic human needs for safety, recognition, achievement, or understanding.*"<sup>4</sup>

She tells the story of *Tony Hoagland, an example of one who discovered what it meant to be not only poor in spirit but blessed. He made the discovery not by spiritual practice, but by getting pancreatic cancer. As an author, he shared his insight to help others by writing about it. He begins by admitting that he had been raised as a white person in America, hearing THAT VOICE from all those around him, THAT VOICE that whispered to him that he deserved to be on top, that he somehow was better. However, getting cancer ended that illusion. He writes, "the first time you enter the MD Anderson Cancer Center, you may feel [alien and forsaken, and like you've] been singled out unfairly, plucked from your healthy life and cast into this cruel ordeal... You'll sense the deep tremor of your animal fear, but then as you pass one hallway after another, looking for where you need to go, you'll see that the place is full of people — riding the escalators, reading books and magazines, checking their phones near the coffeepots-- most of whom have cancer. With relief and dismay you'll realize: I'm not special. The withered old Jewish lefty newspaper editor. The Latino landscape contractor with the stone-roughened hands. You will be cushioned and bolstered by the sheer number and variety of your fellows. In this strange country of cancer everyone is simultaneously a have and a havenot. In this land no citizens are protected by property, job description, prestige, and pretensions; they are not even protected by their prejudices. Neither money nor education, greed nor ambition, can alter the facts. You are all simply cancer citizens, bargaining for more life. In addition, you come to realize that most of your caregivers are people who do not look like you. Your attention is made keen by need and by your intimate dependence upon them, inexhaustibly kind strangers who show decency, patience, compassion, warmth and good humor. I remember the middle-aged nurse from Alabama, his calm Southern twang and beer*

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<sup>4</sup>Carla Pratt Keyes. <https://asermonforeversunday.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Carla-Pratt-Keyes-Beatitudes.pdf>. (accessed 1-27-23).

*belly, who stood firm one night, utterly unperturbed while I vomited repeatedly, as if a demon had seized control of my insides. With empathy, he administered the proper shot and watched until I fell backward into a state of blessed relief. I remember the shift nurse with pale-olive skin and thick eyebrows who, in the middle of the night, brought me hot packs of damp folded towels heated in a microwave. She was from maybe Syria or Egypt. She was so kind and respectful to me that, after she departed, I abruptly burst into tears and blew her a kiss through the closed door.” “I have come to believe, more than ever, that at the bottom of each human being there is a reset button. Undeniably it is difficult to get to. To reach it seems to require that the ego be demolished by circumstance. you must cross this threshold, enter a condition of helplessness, and experience the mysterious intimacy between the sick and their caregivers, between yourself and every person who is equally laid low.”*

Right. Right. The beatitudes, the “Blessings” are Jesus’ declarations of the state of being that we are given by God when we surrender ourselves, completely open ourselves up to nothing else but living the Kingdom, doing God’s way, fulfilling God’s agenda for the world, God’s hopes and dreams for all God’s children. They are the declarations of the wholeness, the contentedness, the abiding happiness that we know when we are so humbled that the pursuit of truth is our clear path, when we love enough to experience the pain and grief of others, when we are so passionate about justice and fairness in the world that we cannot keep from acting on it, when we reach across barriers of race, religion, politics, gender and sexual orientation and do the hard work of peacemaking, when we invest our resources in causes of compassion and mercy for the oppressed and downtrodden, and when we do these things even in the face of ridicule, abandonment and persecution.<sup>5</sup> The Beatitudes are what real life, what real love, for us, followers of Jesus’ bien adventure, looks like. (*repeat*)

And on that mountain so long ago, Jesus didn’t want his followers to miss out on the bien adventure. He also didn’t want them to be misled by the world’s lies. We are not ultimately defined by how much wealth, power, beauty and influence we have. Violence is not the force that prevails. Evil in the end does not get the last word. We are defined, finally, by how well we

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<sup>5</sup> John Buchanan. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2011/020611.html> (accessed 1-27-23).

live and love. As John Buchanan so beautifully says, *“We, Christians, believe that there is a reign of God coming into human history, that the long arc of human history is toward freedom and equality and kindness and love. Jesus lived out his own life based on this truth and died and rose again to prove it.”*<sup>6</sup>

So, the invitation today, brothers and sisters, is to get comfortable in that grassy spot on the mountain and listen, really listen to the God speak to us about the real meaning of life as God’s people.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,”

“Blessed are those who mourn,”

“Blessed are the meek”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”

“Blessed are the merciful.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart”

“Blessed are the peacemakers”

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”

“Blessed are you”<sup>7</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> John Buchanan. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2011/020611.html> (accessed 1-28-23)

<sup>7</sup> My gratitude to John Buchanan for the insight on the ending of this sermon. My gratitude to him for teaching me so much.