

Worship for January 29, 2023
Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

Be still and know that God is.

God was, also, in the beginning.

And when all human striving has ceased, God will be.

From everlasting to everlasting, God is who God will be, worthy of our worship and praise.

Opening Prayer

O God, source of all goodness and beauty, your grace comes fresh every morning. At the dawn of each new day you greet us with light and possibility. We thank you for the ever-present love that satisfies our needs and illumines our paths.

May we be reminded today of your words of life, commit them to our hearts, and live as joyful witnesses to the gospel of love. Amen.

*Hymn 475 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

*Prayer of Confession

Holy and merciful God,

in your presence we confess our failure to be what you created us to be.

You alone know how often we have sinned in wandering from your ways,

in wasting your gifts, in forgetting your love.

By your loving mercy,

help us to live in your light

and abide in your ways,

for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

God decided, through a message some considered foolish, to save those who believe.

Through our life in Christ Jesus, we have been put right with God,

and set free to be God's holy people.

Sisters and brothers,

your sins are forgiven;

be at peace.

First Reading Micah 6:1-8

Moments With Our Young Disciples
Second Reading Matthew 5:1-12
Morning Message

The Pacific Coast Highway from San Francisco to Monterey is one of the most breath-taking sights in America. Miles of ocean landscape, so different from what we Atlantic beach vacationers are familiar with, hundreds of sunbathing seals along the shoreline, acres of asparagus and strawberry farms, the chilly spring air warmed by a sun rising to reveal an ocean painted in brilliant gold leaf.

Capping off a week touring the San Francisco area, we had boarded the bus with forty students and their parents early on a Sunday morning, the last full day of our trip. The hotel sent us off with a grab and go breakfast of a muffin and some fruit. I had been asked to offer the group a brief time of worship when the opportunity presented itself, so, I carried my small copy of the Book of Worship. I pictured all of us gathering on a rocky beach landscape, wildly crashing water offering a cold baptismal spray. It promised to be an extraordinary day. An experience right off the bucket list for many. Maybe even some of you.

And...I missed it. Those of you who have suffered from migraines will recognize what was going on when I say an aura wrapped its evil arms around me and started squeezing one side of my head before it started jumping on my stomach.

On what should have been counted as a day of glorious blessing, I was miserable. It had the potential for creating misery for those around me. I just tried to keep my eyes closed and pray for relief.

In Hebrew there is a beautiful word that calls up moments of blessing. Chesed. (hesed). It is a way of describing moments in life when one realizes that God is present and has made God's love and care known in small inconspicuous ways.

I had an Old Testament professor who explained that chesed for him meant hot coffee in the morning and making a sufficient enough salary to keep his daughters in Gap jeans. The blessed life according to Grant.

It is to the blessed life Jesus points in this passage. And for many years, I had the wrong idea about it. I struggled with it. I would read blessed are the poor, the hungry, the hated and hurt, and know the end of the sentence is going to be something like, "but, when you die and go to heaven, you won't suffer these things," it felt insincere, empty, and decidedly, not helpful.

Well, scripture does testify to heaven as a glorious place, free from any pain, disease, sorrow, or separation. The trouble is, there is often a lot of life between then and now. And the now-ness is overwhelming at times. Moments of chesed-ness are few and far between.

And for so many, near and far away, life is just that hard. Every day. Unrelenting misery. No evidence of blessing. We caught a glimpse of this Friday. News reports were warning that a police body cam videotape would be broadcast that day of the recent police action in Memphis, Tennessee. I had the dreadful feeling that the last horrible moments of a man's life were being used to whet the public's appetite for violence and death.

Jesus said to the suffering, "You are blessed, even though you suffer. Your reward is great in heaven." I'm not sure how that plays in Memphis this morning. And I think if we want the gospel message to be palatable to doubters, we have to acknowledge that there are messages that are hard to understand, but it doesn't mean the Christian faith is defective. It does mean that life is flawed and we have a helper, an advocate, a friend to bear with us in our trials.

The language of the Beatitudes is beautiful, but it isn't a lovely Christian poem about the virtuous life or something we could do in counted cross stitch to hang on the wall. No. The Beatitudes, as delivered by Jesus, were words of hope for a world in transition. In his day, they were radical.

The audience to whom Jesus spoke was living in a land occupied by Roman oppressors. Those in power were elite imperialists who had no use or care for the common folk. The people who followed Jesus were drawn to him because they were hungry for a new way to live, and for a realm of justice and relief from harsh and rigid rule. The Beatitudes offered hope and comfort in an age when there was little of either.

What Jesus is doing is describing a vision of how this world can be if God is at its heart. And, if God is at the heart of our world, then God is in the hearts of God's people, and that's you and me.

Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, says, "I think Jesus should have asked the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the Beatitudes, because that is what he was doing. He was turning the known world upside down, so that those who had been fighting for breath at the bottom of the human heap suddenly found themselves closest to heaven, while those who thought they were on top of things found themselves flat on their backs looking up."

In 1964, the artist, Sister Mary Corita was asked to submit a piece of art to the New York World's Fair. The piece she created was filled with vibrant color. With it came this statement:

“On a mountain, Christ said these words, the Beatitudes. Ever since then men have said these words to each other each time with different gestures. Said yes, this is how it should be. This is the way to be happy.”

And then she used the bold colors of yellow, and orange, and cobalt, and magenta, and added the words of the world’s peacemakers: Anne Frank, Dag Hammarskjold, Albert Einstein, and John F. Kennedy among others.

How can we make our part of the world look more like the vision Jesus described? And, does it mean we have to show up with our paintboxes, our toolboxes?

I think it does. Over the years I’ve worked with teams commissioned to help conflicted churches. Getting from conflict to resolution is never easy. Conflict never ended on the day we delivered our report. No. What we uncovered had to be dealt with, corrected. And they couldn’t do it without support and tangible guidance. The congregation had to re-imagine the vision of God’s kingdom in that place. And when so much has happened, when trust is broken, and friendships destroyed, that vision is illusive.

In Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible, he offers this interpretation of the Beatitudes: “You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all. God’s kingdom is there for the finding. You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry. Then you’re ready for the Messianic Meal. You’re blessed when the tears flow freely. For joy comes in the morning.”

Our friend Barbara Brown Taylor gets the last word this morning with these thoughts: “Upside down, you begin to see God’s blessed ones in places it would never have occurred to you to look. You begin to see that the poor in spirit, the meek and those who mourn are not people you can help, but people who can help you, if you will let them, and that their hunger and thirst for God are not voids to be filled but appetites to be envied.

Upside down, you begin to see that the peacemakers are not flower children but physicians, prescribing God’s own tranquility...Upside down, you begin to see that those who have been bruised for their faith are not the sad ones but the happy ones because they have found something worth being bruised for, and that those who are merciful are just handing out what they have already received in abundance.

The world looks funny upside down, but maybe that is just how it looks when you have got your feet planted in heaven.”

I thought my pain would never end that day in California. I knew I was ruining it for Ed. But when we stopped for lunch, the tour guide/bus driver, said, “Come on. I know just what you

need. It's not far. He led us to a restaurant on Cannery Row. You could dine in or outside where your view would be pretty spectacular. He ordered for me...an order of golden fried fish and chips and a giant Coke. He said I was to eat up and then I could chase it with a pot of tea. Caffeine and protein. That and another dose of Tylenol, I started to feel better. But I slept through the rest of the day, and missed the drive through Carmel-By-the-Sea looking for Mayor Paul Newman. I missed the Spanish missions and Pebble Beach. But, that was ok. I was better thanks to our bus-driving healer. A blessing. Chesed.

Yesterday, my neighbor called with news that her husband was in the hospital. No one wants to be hospitalized, but, they were being well-cared-for. Her pastor had been notified. Everyone was attentive and reassuring that her husband's problem would be addressed immediately. And, thanks to cell phones, they could be in touch with their daughter and other out-of-town family members. I was watching their house. She made it home before dark, which is an important factor at our age. Her husband has a kidney stone. His doctors were outlining a plan to retrieve it. All would be well.

So, friends, blessed are we...the one who writes the sermons and those who tolerate them. Those with headaches and kidney stones and those who bring remedies. Communities in trouble and those whose courage and vision will lead them out.

To God be the glory. Amen.

*Hymn

*Affirmation of Faith Apostles' Creed p. 35

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings including Cents-ability Offering

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Hymn 187 Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us

*Blessing

Go out into the world,

walk with integrity.

do what is right.

Speak the truth with courage.

And may God bless you with divine mercy.
May Christ Jesus open your eyes to see God.
And may the Holy Spirit lead you in righteousness and peace. Amen.

*Postlude