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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Epiphany 6C
Jeremiah 17:5-10
Psalm 1
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Luke 6:17-26

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Today we read what is probably Jesus' most famous sermon. Commonly called the beatitudes, it's found in slightly different forms in both Matthew and here in Luke.

As with so much of scripture, the differences in different versions of the story tell us a lot about what the author meant to convey.

Matthew's version, called the Sermon on the Mount, had Jesus on a mountain, an image associated with Moses receiving the Torah. It's from that physical and theological place, then, that Jesus preached, offering an understanding of blessings to his disciples, gathered there with him.

He preached nine different blessings in total, all spiritualized (and in third person): *Blessed are the poor **in spirit**... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst **for righteousness**...* etc. And instead of the woes we heard today, in Matthew, the sermon closes with the admonition to *rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.*

Not only are the blessings in the third person, but often in the future tense – *Blessed are those...for they will...* And so altogether Matthew gives us a lovely picture of comfort and reassurance that the trials and tribulations we experience will be turned around by God in the end.

But today in Luke, we get something much grittier. Jesus is not up high surrounded by his disciples, but instead in the midst of a crowd down on a level place – evoking the imagery of other prophets, such as Isaiah’s proclamation¹ that the *uneven ground shall become level and the rough places plain* – and also harkening to his mother Mary’s song², the *Magnificat*, with God *lifting up the lowly and bringing down the powerful*.

Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (written in second person) offers four physical blessings: *Blessed are you who **are** poor... Blessed are you who **are** hungry now...* etc., followed by corresponding woes – all framed as *woe to you who **are** now...*

This all serves to provide a sense of immediacy to what Jesus preached: God is present and active now, working to bring everyone to a level place – pulling up the lowly and bringing low those set above.

Whether on the mount or from a level place, the thing that remains the same is the idea of God’s blessing, which Jesus likely intended in a very different way that we often take it.

“I’m so blessed” we often say, when what we really mean is that things are going well and I’m happy. “You’re so blessed” we tell someone when we mean that they are fortunate. The uncomfortable flip side of that is that if things aren’t going well, well, does that mean we’re “not blessed”? Such it has become in much American religious thought, that is the foundation of the Prosperity Gospel way of thinking.

Blessing is such a deep and wonderful thing in the Bible, yet we too often dismiss its rich texture for something more comfortable. And it’s not just a modern thing! It’s not like we, as 21st century Christians, are the first to make it something softer.

¹ Isaiah 40:4

² Luke 1:52

The word beatitude itself comes from Latin, meaning happy or fortunate – and it didn't come from Jesus. It was St. Jerome, in the fourth century, who chose to call the passages on blessings the beatitudes, and it stuck.

Happy or fortunate doesn't hit the mark, though, when we're talking about God's blessings. As a rabbi, Jesus would have known that there are several Hebrew words for what we would translate as blessed. These words more deeply illuminate the experience of blessing amid grief, problems, and pain.³ But more than that, Hebrew teaches us that to be blessed is to belong to God who is the source of everything.

Two words for blessing that stand out are *baruk* and *ashre*. *Baruk* (which invokes the image of kneeling), is used in traditional Hebrew prayer, which begins *Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu...* – Blessed are you, Lord our God... – acknowledges God as the foundation of blessing and so offers blessing to God (similar in intent to our prayer “All things come of thee, O Lord, and to thine own have we given thee” – an understanding of the cyclical nature of God and source and object of blessing). *Ashre*, on the other hand, translates into English something like, “on the right track” or “going in the right direction” or “you're not lost” – which is reflected in the assurances given in the blessings in both sermons.

The Greek word for blessing, *makar*, takes us further into the depth of what it means to be blessed, for it is associated with fate and death. It means being blessed is to be deathless and no longer subject to fate. It is as Paul writes about in 1Corinthians today, we are raised with Christ in the resurrection.

None of this is about being happy or fortunate. God's blessings aren't rewards, they are promises. Promises that we are asked to trust in – to have faith in. That God will be with us when we are poor and hungry and weep and excluded – and that God is working to make all things new.

³ Riff on Hebrew and Greek from The Rev. Lisa Senuta

The blessings aren't the spiritual or physical states, but God's abiding presence throughout.

It's why, in the end, the differences between Matthew's and Luke's beatitudes don't really matter – because they are both true because God is true.

So the next time you think you yourself “what a blessing”, or say to a friend “you're blessed” – take a moment to think about the depth of what that really means. And the next time things go wrong – big or small – take a moment to remember that you're blessed in that too, because God is with you, **always**.

~ AMEN ~