

Sermon: Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A

Matthew 5:1-12

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St. Luke's ~ San Lucas Episcopal Church

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The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' first public act in the Gospel of Matthew and, according to many scholars, it offers a summary of Jesus' ministry.

Originally, the Beatitudes—or Sermon on the Mount, as this passage is named—pronounce blessings upon a community to which the writer of this Gospel belonged: a community that, in first-century Palestine, was persecuted and living under the domination and occupation of the Roman Empire.

As I read the biblical commentaries, it becomes clear that we cannot simply leave the past behind. The past refuses to let go, and, for reasons we may never fully understand, history repeats itself in cycles.

In the face of circumstances beyond our control, many of us have felt overwhelmed and helpless in recent days. We have experienced disturbing events that have occurred in our communities and our country. Honestly, I don't want to open my news apps anymore; I'm afraid of what I may find.

Yes, many of us have felt overwhelmed and helpless in recent days. I cannot help but wonder if Jesus felt the same way as he pronounced the Beatitudes—overwhelmed by everything he had experienced, yet still speaking words of blessing and hope.

Just to put it in perspective, one chapter earlier in Matthew 4, everything has been happening at once: Jesus is baptized, the voice of God speaks, and the Spirit descends like a dove. He spends forty days in the wilderness without food or water, facing temptation from the devil. He learns that his cousin has been imprisoned. He calls a few fishermen to follow him, and everywhere he goes, people bring him the sick and suffering—the demon-possessed, the paralyzed, and the ill—and he heals them all. Then he goes up the mountain. His disciples follow. And at last, he sits down and takes a deep breath.

As a fully human man, I'm sure Jesus felt more than just overwhelmed. But despite that, he knew exactly what to do at that moment. He pronounced blessings on those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who work for peace, those persecuted for doing what is right, and those insulted and mistreated because of what Jesus is proclaiming.

Yes, many of us have felt overwhelmed and helpless in recent days. We are not the only ones. But there is hope.

Just yesterday, 154 bishops of the Episcopal Church, including our Bishop Phil Labelle, wrote an open letter to all people in this country (I made copies for you to take). This is the same call we heard today in the gospel message.

Recent events in Minnesota and across the nation remind us that fear, violence, and injustice continue to harm lives and communities. Our bishops are inviting us to follow our moral compass and to challenge rhetoric that spreads fear instead of upholding truth. They are reminding us, as Episcopalians, that our moral compass is firmly rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the face of grief, outrage, and uncertainty, this is a moment for action. As a people of faith, they call us to stand by our values and act as our conscience demands. And this, I would say, is not a matter of partisan politics, but a test of our personal and public morality and our commitment to human decency.

And yes, in our baptismal covenant, we promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Whose dignity matters? Our faith gives a clear answer: everyone's. True safety and healing come not from fear, but from compassion, justice, and accountability. They said.

Yes, this is a crucial day for our nation and our communities. And I know that many of you may feel a turbulence of emotions right now... You may feel pain, fear, or you may be in shock. With good reason, you may be upset. With good reason, you may be angry. Overwhelmed.

So, what must we do? How must we respond? I wonder, how should we act?

With everything that is happening, you may feel a turbulence of emotions and notice a number of toxic thoughts running through your mind. But remember: negative emotions and thoughts pull you away from your peaceful center and make it harder to hear the quiet voice of your soul—the gentle voice of the divine.

Just last Saturday, I attended our diocesan retreat for the governing bodies. During that time, many of the clergy asked what we should do in these turbulent times, and our Bishop Phil responded by quoting Thomas Merton, the architect of centering prayer:

"Action is the stream. Contemplation and prayer feed the spring of water in our inner life, which then feeds the stream of action and shapes how we engage the world. The contemplative work must be done first, and done regularly, if our actions are to remain pure and follow the way of Jesus."

That silent voice, the voice of the divine is there within ourselves.

We just need to pay attention and be attentive. The voice of God is always within us, but we can only hear that voice if we are in our peaceful center.

Yes, God is at work all the time despite all appearances to the contrary ... and this is the Good News.

So, again: What must we do? How should we respond?

In tumultuous times like this, we turn to God to find peace and stability. And yes... we lament... *How long, O Lord? How long???*

And it is okay to lament... and share with one another what is on our hearts, even as they may be broken. There is power when we share our stories because our stories are sacred.

Parker Palmer suggests that rather than breaking apart, our hearts might be broken open to allow for a greater capacity for love and compassion... and in this way, transform ourselves, others and the world.

This is a Kairos moment...

And Kairos is a Greek word meaning an opportune or critical moment often with spiritual or transformative significance.

and it is a Kairos moment because we are in a time when conditions are right to accomplish a crucial action.

And then we act. When we act from our spiritual center, each of us has real power,

Our bishops remind us that we have community power, financial power, political power, and knowledge power. We can show up for our neighbors, contact elected officials and vote, and learn our rights so we can speak up peacefully without fear.

We can show up by just being present, by being present in the world that we personally encounter.

And we pray, with our actions grounded in God, putting our trust in God as the psalm reminds us:

The Lord is my light and my help; whom should I fear?

And you know what? Trusting in God becomes a prayer when we act. When we act out of love while staying rooted in our peaceful center, our efforts for justice become a form of prayer. Motivated by love, our actions reflect God's desire for us. And then we are reminded by the words of the prophet Micah of what God requires of us: "*To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.*"

AMEN

A note from the preacher:

Because sermons are meant to be preached and therefore prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., they are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

