

Sermon for Zion, February 25 – Lent 2

Hymns: 4 – Lord as I wake I turn to you; Jesus, Draw Me Close; All in All;  
730 – O for a world

Scripture: Matthew 5:1-10

Sermon Title: The Beatitudes: “Wonderful News” – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

### **Matthew 5:1-10**

*Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:*

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit,*

*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn,*

*for they will be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek,*

*for they will inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,*

*for they will be filled.*

*Blessed are the merciful,*

*for they will be shown mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure in heart,*

*for they will see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,*

*for they will be called children of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,*

*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

One of the highlights of any trip to Israel is being able to read the Scriptures in the very locations where those words originated. And one of those great moments for me is on the Mount of the Beatitudes. It is one of the most beautiful places in all of Israel; the Church of the Beatitudes is on a steep, grassy hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee; beautiful gardens and soaring palm and cypress trees frame the views. There are walkways for contemplation and prayer, with the Beatitudes – Latin for “Blessing” – carved on stone plaques throughout.

My favourite place to read the Blessings is not in the church itself, but rather on a balcony which wraps around the church, giving this beautiful view. And I tell the group to look not at me as I read, but instead to look out, down the mountainside,

over the lake; I invite them to imagine the crowds of long ago, straining to hear these very words. And then I tell them to get ready to hear something surprising:

*You're lucky if you're poor. God's kingdom belongs to you.  
And you can be happy in the midst of grief, because comfort is coming.  
And rejoice if you don't think of yourself as more important than everyone else; the whole earth is your inheritance.  
And those who are hungry and thirsty? They're receiving God's favour, because they will be filled to overflowing.*

By this time, the group is giving me odd looks. This isn't what they were expecting. And that's good, because when Jesus said these words the first time, people weren't expecting them either.

The harsh realities of life had taught people that the poor are anything but lucky. That the grieving are most to be pitied. That the meek are the first to get trampled. And that being hungry and thirsty is no fun at all. The merciful? Suckers. The pure in heart? Dreamers. The peacemakers? Delusional. The persecuted? Victims.

And yet Jesus said, Lucky. Happy. Blessed.

OK, "blessed" we can get our head around. That's an appropriate, nice sounding, good and holy word. When we hear "blessed" in the context of the Beatitudes, we image pious people, casting their eyes towards heaven, as they grimly endure poverty, grief, hunger, persecution.

But the word Jesus is using, which in the Greek text of Matthew is "makarios," doesn't mean anything close to pious suffering. In other Greek literature of Matthew's time, it is best translated "Fortunate," or even, "Lucky." It isn't a strictly religious word, like "Blessed." It's a word you're just as likely to hear when a couple of soldiers are throwing dice to pass the time, or gamble for a robe, hoping for "lucky seven."

To complicate matters further, when Jesus was giving the Sermon on the Mount, which starts with these Beatitudes, he isn't using Greek – he's speaking Hebrew, or at least the form of Hebrew known as Aramaic. And throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew form of the word "esher" is translated "Happy." Happy! Like in the Psalms: (*Psalm 33:12*) *Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage;* (*Psalm 34:8*) *O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him;* (*Psalm 84:12*) *O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who*

*trusts in you.* There are dozens more examples. When Jesus is giving the Beatitudes, “happy” is what he’s getting at.

The trouble is, I don’t think we understand the word “happy” any more than we do “blessed.” My reliable Oxford dictionary defines Happy as “lucky, fortunate, contented with one’s lot, successful, apt, felicitous.” But I don’t think that’s really what “happy” means anymore. So I tried my own definition of what constitutes “happy” in our current culture, and came up with “a complete absence of worry, concern, ailment, hardship, effort, or responsibility.”

But “a complete absence of worry, concern, ailment, hardship, effort, or responsibility” sounds too close to the definition for “dead” so I added “and the presence of pleasure, amusement, or satiation.” Which is a definition of happy which makes the Sermon on the Mount seem a bit weird. Because if that’s what “happy” means now, then “Happy are the poor, happy are those who mourn,” doesn’t really work. I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ve had to rethink the way I’ve been translating the Beatitudes. “Happy,” or “Lucky,” has the shock value – that, “What did he say?” quality I think Jesus was looking for - but “happy” just doesn’t seem right. Not anymore.

So I went looking for help. And I found it, through the work of Biblical scholar N.T. Wright. He reminded me that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ declaration of what the Kingdom of God looks like – the Kingdom which comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. To figure out what the Beatitudes mean, Wright does what I should have done – he takes a look at what happens in the Gospel of Matthew, before the Sermon on the Mount happens in Chapter 5. If you’re having trouble figuring something out from the Bible, always look at what happens just before and just after. Always look at the context.

Quick Gospel of Matthew summary: in Chapter 1, we get the genealogy and birth of Jesus. “Here’s where he came from and how he was born,” says Matthew. Chapter 2, we get the Wise Men; crazy, murderous old King Herod; and the Holy Family hightailing it to Egypt and back. “Here’s the world Jesus was born into,” says Matthew.

Chapter 3, Matthew introduces John the Baptist, who prepares the way for Jesus; and as Jesus is baptised by John, we hear God speak: “*This is my beloved Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.*” “Now you know,” says Matthew, “who Jesus is.”

In Chapter 4, Jesus prepares for ministry with his forty days of trial in the wilderness, and finally, upon the imprisonment of his forerunner John, Jesus returns to Galilee and establishes his ministry; as Matthew writes: *“From that time on, Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”* Jesus begins to call his disciples, and his ministry commences in earnest. Again from Matthew (4:23): *“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”* In other words, “Now you know,” says Matthew, “what Jesus did.”

So, the stage is set for Chapter 5. The ministry of Jesus begins; the inauguration of the Kingdom; the proclamation of the Good News. And what does that Kingdom look like? What is the Good News? Ladies and Gentlemen, the Beatitudes. Ladies and Gentlemen, the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus’ declaration not of the world as it is, but the world he is bringing into being. In N.T. Wright’s translation:

*“Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours.*

*“Wonderful news for the mourners! You’re going to be comforted.*

*“Wonderful news for the meek! You’re going to inherit the earth.*

*“Wonderful news for people who hunger and thirst for God’s justice!*

*You’re going to be satisfied.*

*“Wonderful news for the merciful! You’ll receive mercy yourselves.*

*“Wonderful news for the pure in heart! You will see God.*

*“Wonderful news for the peacemakers! You’ll be called God’s children.*

*“Wonderful news for people who are persecuted because of God’s way!*

*The kingdom of heaven belongs to you.*

- Has the world broken you, crushed your spirit, ruined your hopes? Wonderful news – you are a citizen of God’s kingdom now!
- Are your hearts broken by grief, at the thought of a loved one gone? Wonderful news - we shall be together again!
- Are you getting trampled by others, falling behind while everyone else accumulates more and more? Wonderful news – Your self esteem is actually rooted in being a child of the creator of all!
- Does it seem as though there is no justice, that the evil prosper, that the world is not fair? Wonderful news - God’s justice is coming!
- Have you been merciful? Wonderful news - God will be merciful to you!
- Have you sought to do and live and think kindly and compassionately? Wonderful news - You will see God!
- Have you strived for peace in a world of conflict and war? Wonderful news - You are living like a child of God!

- Are you suffering because of your faith? Are you ridiculed because of your belief in me? Wonderful news – the Kingdom of God is your true home!

Jesus, in the Beatitudes, turns the values of the world on its head, because true happiness doesn't consist of "a complete absence of worry, concern, ailment, hardship, effort, or responsibility; and the presence of pleasure, amusement, or satiation." True happiness – the life-changing, world-changing deep-down contentment – can be with us and can be at the core of who we are, even in the midst of financial distress, lack of outward success, even grief itself. True happiness comes from knowing who we are, of knowing whose we are, and in whose Kingdom we belong – we are the children of God, the Brothers and the Sisters of Jesus Christ, citizens of the Kingdom of God. And that Kingdom is coming in its fullness – in fact, in Jesus Christ, that Kingdom is among us now. Not down the road, not in the sweet by and by – now.

That is the Good News which Jesus proclaimed and which Jesus lived, bringing healing, hope and salvation to our world. And it is in Jesus and through Jesus – through following him as Saviour and Lord – that the Kingdom can be fully realised in us and through us. I have seen that Kingdom at work in many lives – lives where contentment didn't rest in how much they owned, but how much they were able to share; lives where the grieving found comfort, knowing a reunion lay ahead; lives where mercy, kindness and compassion were their own reward, and were in fact returned a hundred-fold.

That is what it truly is to be happy. That is what it means to be Blessed. This old world is fighting back; we are still deep in the struggle. But the Kingdom of God is among us. The Kingdom of God is now.

*“Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours.*

*“Wonderful news for the mourners! You're going to be comforted.*

*“Wonderful news for the meek! You're going to inherit the earth.*

*“Wonderful news for people who hunger and thirst for God's justice!*

*You're going to be satisfied.*

*“Wonderful news for the merciful! You'll receive mercy yourselves.*

*“Wonderful news for the pure in heart! You will see God.*

*“Wonderful news for the peacemakers! You'll be called God's children.*

*“Wonderful news for people who are persecuted because of God's way!*

*The kingdom of heaven belongs to you.*

Blessed are you. Amen.