

The *setting* of our gospel story today provides us with a panoramic view of Jesus, sitting on a mountainside.... teaching his disciples.

Mountains are mentioned frequently in the Bible as they dot the landscape of biblical regions, making them a part of the physical reality of the Bible. Mountains also have significant symbolic value for biblical cultures since they are “closer to God,” who was believed to dwell in the heavens – as in the sky. Mount Sinai was the location where Moses received the law of the Ten Commandments; Mount Zion is where the Temple of Jerusalem was built; and Matthew has six significant “mountain scenes” in his gospel, and today’s focus is on one of those scenes ..... the Beatitudes.

Many of us have had our own “mountaintop experiences,” which may or may not have played an important role in our journey or shaped future decisions. But as Christians, we realize that the “mountain” is merely a point in the overall picture. Whatever circumstances prompted the awe-inspiring-take-your-breath away experience, reality finds us back in the valley at some point. Back to the mundane. Back to the often chaotic pace -filled with anxious moments and thoughts. Back to the brokenness, suffering, and heartache that life entails.... And it was *no* different for the disciples - as they were absorbed in their mountain top experience with Jesus. You see they, too, had to come down off the mountain.

But as we stand back from this panoramic view of what Jesus is teaching his disciples, we see a strange familiarity between the Beatitudes and the Ten Commandments. However this time, the message is delivered in a whole new setting, to a whole new group of people and for a whole new purpose. The recipients this time, are Jesus' inner circle, the twelve; experiencing the message firsthand and within close proximity to the source. But as Matthew alludes to later in the gospel, with Jesus as the keynote speaker, the crowds are not far behind and the perimeter begins to grow. I visualize those who are further back in the crowd, craning their necks to see and hear what's going on as Jesus delivers this message. It reminds me of when we would take our boys to a parade and if we hadn't arrived in time to 'get the curb' we didn't always catch all the action. Sometimes a person or group in front of us would relay something we had missed; so, too, with the the crowd gathering around Jesus on the mountainside. They *knew* there was something worth hearing or seeing. And, as it turns out, they were right .....

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* receive 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 for righteousness' sake, for *theirs is* the kingdom of heaven.

Out of the nine promises listed in the Beatitudes, two of these are in the present tense... ..Blessed are the poor in spirit, for **theirs IS** the kingdom of heaven...Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for **theirs IS** the kingdom of heaven. The Kingdom of God *is*-already here for those who mourn, or hunger and thirst..... and for the rest of the promises...blessed are the pure in heart for **they, will** see God; **they, will** inherit the earth; **they, will** receive mercy. All signify... the future tense. The Kingdom of God -Jesus is describing in the Beatitudes *is* already here AND not yet come! Wow! Jesus has certainly given his disciples -and us, a radically different view of the world on top of this mountain.

But what does this new view look like to us as Christians? as Lutherans? as people of God? Where do we 'fit' in this kingdom of God that is already *and* not yet come? Pastor Bill has often referred to this 'place' as "living within the tension of *this* world while being assured of Christ's promise for the future." (And I surmise that) those who mourn and are comforted - represent *all* of us. Those of us on the inside, and the out; those of us who are craning their necks to hear and those who have resolved themselves to the fact that they are just too, far, away... to hear anything. We are *all* living in the middle of the grace... and mercy.... of the beatitudes. And to live and extend this grace *is* the call to the present, the here and now - where we work, where we worship and where we reside.

Now this, *could* be the end of our story today; to love others, to care and comfort the brokenhearted and to stand up for what is right. But the message (on the mountain) does not end here. Jesus has *always* been about human need and suffering and how there *will be* change and there *will be* good news for the meek, the merciful and for those who mourn. Today, however, Jesus' teaching takes us a bit further down the mountain.

Theologian William Loder describes the descent like this:

“...the beatitudes have been changed from Luke's version of promises to the poor and hungry.... to challenges *for* the people to be 'poor in spirit' and to 'hunger after righteousness'. The focus is less on the needy to whom the promises are made and more on hearers, who need to be challenged to take up new attitudes.” (end quote)

Perhaps this is reflective of the challenge that God is issuing to Israel through the prophet Micah today – *and*, what God is *requiring* of his people. (a little sidebar) Micah is speaking to the people during a time when Israel was thriving economically, but suffering spiritually. And it was *this* type of environment which led to the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. Micah is reminding the people - of God's faithfulness in his kingdom, which, incidentally, is *already* 'there'.

“... For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

Oh my people, remember ... the saving acts of the Lord.”

Unfortunately, the people's rapid responses did not reflect repentant hearts or those who are poor in spirit...but hearts, that out of a sense of urgency, want to make things right again with outward sacrifices: (and "stuff")

"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? Will 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?"

(But) Micah utters God's response in the form of a question:

"...and what does the Lord require of you; but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

It sounds.... so .... simple.

Could it be- that the challenge God delivers through the prophet Micah *and* through Jesus' teaching of the Beatitudes, are **both** calls to action? But not in the "hurry-up-and-get-it-done-way" but with an attitude of humility and deep compassion; with a heart that is poor in spirit, and with a hunger for justice and peace, especially in a world that is, *anything* but peaceable. Living within the tension and chaos of this world as children of God, requires us to work *within* the messiness of life **and** with the right attitude. And that's not easy, when images of hatred and destruction flash across our screens daily; when we see Syrian refugees (all refugees) mourn the loss of their children, their homeland and their hope; it's not easy when a nation's economic prosperity (the rise to the top)

dismantles equality and justice for all; and it's not easy when children in our own community are subjected to abuse and neglect and suffer silently. slowly.....

It is a *hefty* task to live out the Beatitudes... one that must be accompanied by grace... and mercy...*and* the knowledge that the kingdom of God is *already* here – in us and through us and yes, in front of us.

To be poor in spirit, (to) hunger after righteousness- and have an insatiable thirst for what is right and good, *is* the challenge we face... as we come down off the mountain:

“..... to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly *with* God.”

Amen.