

Jeremiah 17:5-10

Psalm 1

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Luke 6:17-26

This morning we find ourselves approaching the end of the season of the Epiphany...the sixth Sunday in the season of Jesus revealing himself to us along with revealing the world of God and the nature of God to us. Remember what we heard at the annunciation when the angel Gabriel tells Mary what's about to happen to her? Mary sings the Magnificat...the song that speaks of the world that we know as normal being turned upside down by God as a result of Jesus entering into it.

“...His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
He has shown strength with his arm;  
He has scattered the proud in the  
thoughts of their hearts.  
He has brought down the powerful from  
their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
He has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants  
forever.”

And this morning, in the gospel of Luke, toward the beginning of his ministry, we hear these same sentiments from Jesus himself. The Magnificat is also quite similar to the Sermon on the Mount that we have heard in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus has gone up the mountain to the top because that is where he communes with God. On the way back down the mountain he begins choosing his disciples. There are throngs of people who follow after Jesus, but not all of them are tapped to be disciples. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus pauses part way down the mountain and gives his Sermon on the Mount and He feeds the five thousand people in the crowd. When Jesus delivers his sermon on the Mount he gives the crowd nine beatitudes...nine circumstances in which people are favored by God. He's describing to them how their life will be different in the Kingdom of God. What they lack now will be plentiful then. What they have lost in this life will be restored to them. What has been wrong in this life will be corrected in the next. And Matthew adds to the blessings the phrase "in spirit" which softens the message just a bit. He refers to people being poor...poor, not just financially poor, but poor in spirit; and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. Each circumstance Jesus names has an outcome designed by God which is not the outcome customarily experienced by people in *this* life.

The gospel of Luke is a little different. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus goes to the summit of the mountain and then comes back down all the way to the base of the mountain. At the base is where he stood with his disciples; on a level place side-by-side with those who were gathered around him and he began to teach and heal. However, in Luke's version of this event, there are 4 blessed and 4 woes. In Luke, Jesus does not preach halfway down the mountain where he is physically located in a lofty place; in Luke Jesus is standing on the plain...on a level space *with* the people at the foot of the mountain. The word 'level' often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning. And this sounds more like Jesus is preaching at the gates of hell rather than about the pearly gates of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is from this vantage point that Jesus explains to

his newly appointed disciples (and to the throng of people pressing near him) what the kingdom of God will be like...who will be included and who will be left out. To live under the verdict of "woe" means condemnation...suffering under curse in the present and receiving final consignment to eternal punishment after the apocalypse. While standing in a broken, level world Jesus teaches the ways of the present and the coming renewal in the apocalyptic Realm of God.

The Realm of God is exactly what he has come to show us, to share with us, to model for us and to explain to both them and to us how we make our entrance into that Realm. And what Jesus has to say is hard-hitting. Jesus doesn't pull any punches or soften the requirements. He's quite blunt in what he has to say about living in the Realm of God...in the Kingdom of God. It seems that God's good news for the poor is also tough news for those who are *not* poor. And Jesus doesn't mince words or sugar-coat anything. He is quite exact and explicit. While standing in a broken level world, Jesus teaches the ways of the present and coming renewal of the world by means of the Realm of God. Luke reminds his hearers that they are called to continue to live lives 'rich toward God' no matter how long it seems to be taking for God's reign to be fully present. Those are important words for us to hear as well.

However, entrance into the Kingdom of God or the Realm as Luke calls it is not something that people do by virtue of their own will or their own actions. It is God who empowers the eschatological community with the Holy Spirit. The question for us is...how do we become members of that eschatological community? That's the hard part. And it is good news to the rich and mighty, but only if they follow a path of radical obedience, which in turn will affect both their riches and their power.<sup>1</sup> Do not lose heart, however. If you've studied your Bible you know that the one man that God singled out to be the father of a nation...the head of the tribe that became the nation of Israel...was far more wealthy in his day than any of us can possibly imagine. And God certainly favored Abraham. God did so because Abraham listened to God, Abraham

believed God and Abraham did as God directed including preparing Isaac for sacrifice on the Lord's altar.

Jesus' followers (and that's us!) are to live in the present on the basis of the values and practices of the Realm and all of us have come to learn what those are: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the infirm and those in prison, release the captives, take care of the widows and orphans, be kind to the stranger in your midst, share all your resources with those who are in need and love one another as Jesus loves. This is the price of discipleship. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and not just a follower or an interested bystander. When God asks us to come with him, he doesn't want it to be part time. He wants *all* of each one of us. That's the cost of discipleship; God wants it all! God wants the entirety of our lives, our hearts and our souls. To be blessed of God is to have nothing but God. As Luke describes to us, the realm of God rests among those who have only God.

This sermon from Jesus is about those who have made a commitment to follow Christ; and most of us here have made that commitment in our baptism. The fulfillment of God's demands will not come from effort and resources on our part; it will come by way of divine grace; our fulfillment of the demands of this sermon is the enabling work of the gift of grace, the gift of the Spirit and the power of the Holy Spirit

The Great Sermon is the call to a radical way of discipleship that turns the way of the world upside down. It is the great reversal that Mary sang about before Jesus arrived. God isn't counting our pennies; he certainly didn't count Abraham's. God wants to know if we're listening to him. God wants to know if we're going to do as God says. God wants our obedience and our trust and even our dependence. God wants to know if we are listening for Him and if we are doing as He asks us to do. Is God present in our thinking in the good times as well as the bad? The 'woes' are not anything God is going to do to us. The 'woes' are the natural consequences of forgetting about God in the good times and relying on our own strength. We know that God walks with us in the

bad times. Do we pay as much attention to God in the good times? God is always with us. And woe is us if we're not aware of God's presence in the good time. Woe is us indeed. Just as God comforts and sustains us in the bad times, God also rejoices with us in the good times.

It's that simple. And it's that complicated. As the Rev. Martin Luther King explained to us: "Faith is taking the first step when you can't see the whole staircase." God wants our trust and our dependence. Material things will come and go. Accolades from peers will be fleeting at best. Hard work may go unrecognized, but the source of the peace in our hearts is the sure knowledge that God know us and we know that we are wholly dependent on God....first, last, and always.

The woes will come, but not from God. They come when we turn away from God. It is God who loves us unconditionally. It is God who is with us always. It is God who stands beside us and holds us up regardless of our circumstance. He sees us through the good times and the bad ones. In return, God asks that we depend only on God. God asks that we put God above all else. God is steadfast and reliable and God asks the same of us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

<sup>1</sup>Gonzalez, Justo L., Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Luke, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky. p.93.