

“Mountain”
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2017
Text: Matthew 5: 1-12

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"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.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Introduction—Up the Mountain

So, let's climb. Climbing is good. Let's go up to the mountain. Let's get closer to the heavens to hear a message about the kingdom of heaven. Today's gospel reading from Matthew is the opening words from a message that is famously known as the Sermon on the Mount.

Many say they follow Jesus. But if you follow Jesus, sometimes he takes you up the mountain. And something extraordinary happens on this mountain. A teaching unfolds that will reset the course of humanity. Something life-changing is revealed. It's as if the kingdom of heaven is un-scrolled and shown to the ones who follow Jesus up that mountain that day.

Matthew begins the story with a view of the crowd. It is somewhere near the Sea of Galilee where Jesus has been in the last while healing many people of all kinds of diseases. Because of these miracles there are crowds everywhere Jesus goes. On this day, when Jesus sees the crowds, he goes up the mountain. Yet he doesn't go alone. Today many people will climb after him to hear about the kingdom of heaven. So, let's climb.

The View

Jesus goes up the mountain and sits down; and after he sits down, his disciples come to him.

How often he's been up in the mountains. It's his usual practice to spend time in prayer, communicating to his heavenly father. And he does this often in the early morning in the mountains that shoulder the Galilean Sea.

You get a new point of view up on a mountain. You can look at the world with new eyes. And Jesus sees not only the creation layed out in front of him, he sees all the people who have followed him up the mountain. And what a view that is! In those days it's a different kind of person following Jesus. It's not the religious professionals taking a liking to Jesus; no, it's those sinners he hangs around with. Not the ones who have it all together, but the mess-ups, the lost ones, the confused people and the poor souls whose faith is hanging on by a thread. It's not the spiritual heroes as much as it's the spiritual zeroes. But this is how it is now. God is opening the kingdom to everyone.

Sitting there, Jesus sees all the people who are climbing up that mountain with him. People filled with joy, but also the ones filled with unspeakable grief. The ones mourning the loss of loved ones, the ones grieving over broken relationships, the ones who cry over their land being oppressed by the occupying forces of the Roman empire; the ones whose hearts ache over a divided people. The crowd is filled with the people who find a glimmer of hope in Jesus in the midst of mourning; they are the ones up on the mountain to hear some good news.

While the machinery of war grinds on, and the survival of the strongest has been the way since the fall of humanity, the weak and defenseless all through history have been run over and forgotten. Jesus, the one who would be arrested, tortured, and executed is well acquainted with this kind of suffering, and recognizes it in the faces of some of those on the mountain who draw near to where he sits. Their long, dark night of suffering has come to an end, and the dawn of their new day has arrived.

And he sees a crowd filled with people who are hungry and thirsty. But their hunger is not for food, and their thirst is not for water. They are starving for something more, something much deeper. For too long they have been deprived of what they need the most. For too long they have been held at a distance from their life source. For too long they have been kept from their relationship with God. But now in Jesus they've seen something different, and they have heard a voice with a new message. His is the voice that cuts through the maddening action of a cruel world to plainly say that mercy matters. His voice teaches that the issues of the heart are the ones that matter most. It's the voice of Jesus ringing out that calls for peace. It's the voice that has called them up the mountain. At long last, he is the one who will bring reconciliation with God. The heart of the entire mountain now beats with anticipation.

Jesus Begins

This is the crowd. This is the view Jesus has. He has gone up on the mountain, and found a place to sit. His disciples come to him and

Then he begins to speak, and teaches them, saying:

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They are people of the valley no more; they are now on top of the mountain. They are with the one who forgives sin and removes shame, the one who brings reconciliation, and the one who brings healing. And they are with the one who brings the good news that God is opening the kingdom of heaven to everyone. No one is barred from this kingdom.

An Invitation

These Beatitudes are the opening part of the Sermon on the Mount. We are going to stay on the mountain and hear more of this teaching over the next few weeks. I invite you to stay with it. This is a life-changing teaching from Jesus, and I promise that if you stick with it something profound will shift in your spiritual journey. This is a message that first appeared in the Gospel of Matthew roughly two thousand years ago. Jesus turned the world upside down with this sermon. And I guarantee it still applies to our world, maybe now more than ever.

But it begins with these blessings. So, receive them, and rejoice that they remain all these centuries later, staying with us just as Jesus promised, all the way to this day and beyond. Amen.