

Beatitudes and Micah 6, January 2017

It's good to be together on this morning of January 29, gathered in worship. I think it's fair to say that different motivations may have brought us here, but regardless of that, our presence here celebrates God and opens us up to receiving God's blessings. What are looking for here today? I come this morning frankly looking for a glimmer of hope and a lifeline to cling to. Maybe you do, too. Here's why: apart from the last two days, it's been predominantly gray outside for about two weeks. That's a lot of gray. It's getting people down. Furthermore, this is the official kazillionth day that our national political scene is an exercise in what appears to be anger, chaos, futility, and polarity. I have to brace emotionally before I turn on the news or go onto social media. Between gray skies and political toxicity, life seems to be a barrage of negativity. Add to that the fact that there's no decent football to watch this weekend, as the Pro Bowl doesn't count, and that Mary Tyler Moore, whom I idolized as a young teenager, died last week, and you just have to wonder: what next? I'm looking for some uplift, some inspiration, something solid to which I may cling. If you can relate at all, then we're all in luck: we have come to the right place and the right source to find just exactly those things.

Not only do we have the warmth, light, and uplift that comes from worshipping God, from enjoying friendship with other members of our church family, and sharing in a meal with Christ, the light and hope of the world; we also have these Scripture texts before us that are quite wonderful. In a world where the new buzz phrase is "alternate facts"---which does seem a contradiction in terms, I'm thinking---we have before *us* an alternate world view which rings *true*. In the gospel, we have the beloved Beatitudes, the "blessed are's" of Jesus. They hold up an alternative vision of who in this crazy world is

actually blessed. In Micah we have one of the most famed Old Testament verses that lay out three simple guidelines for how to live well, by God's standards, in a crazy world. I have a feeling we may find that God is meeting us right where we're at in these lessons this morning.

Let's consider first the Beatitudes. They are the first section of Jesus' sermon on the mount. That sermon is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Matthew's Gospel. Recognize with me that sometimes it's difficult to pinpoint just when a movement or career really began or took off; perhaps for that reason, each Gospel writer seems to pinpoint the beginning of Jesus' public ministry a little differently, *but* in a way that reflects the overarching theme of each entire Gospel. In Mark, Jesus' first public act is an exorcism, and throughout Mark, we see Jesus take on evil. In Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry by identifying himself with the prophet Isaiah's servant of justice, and Jesus is all about justice in Luke. In John, the first public act of Jesus is turning water into wine---lots and lots of wine---and John is eager throughout his Gospel to show us Jesus as the bringer of an abundance of God's grace. Here in Matthew, Jesus begins by giving a series of teachings to his disciples and then to the crowds. And throughout Matthew, Jesus is held up for us as *teacher*---and *we*, as disciples, are invited to sit at his feet and *learn*. I found this, in itself, to be a helpful remedy to things as they currently are for this reason---a student learns best when they are able to approach learning with an open and calm mind. Right now, I feel the temptation to be in a constant state of urgency, emotional reactivity, or---conversely---to become totally lethargic and give up. Neither are the attitude of a student. If Christ is our teacher, and Scripture and Creation are our lessons, then we best approach them with a less reactive state of mind. What can

God *teach* us in these days? I'm going to try and adapt that as a mental framework moving forward. And what does God teach us specifically in the Beatitudes and in Micah, chapter 6, this morning?

As I said earlier, the Beatitudes present an alternative vision of who is blest, in the eyes of God. *Markios*, the Greek word used at the beginning of each of these statements, is a word for which it is a little hard to find just the proper English equivalent. "Happy" or "fortunate" are close to the meaning, but "blest" is the best, in that it indicates a spiritual content to our happiness or good fortune. With that in mind, whom does the world name as being blest, happy, or fortunate? Is it not the person who is successful, financially prosperous, enjoying excellent health, and surrounded by loving family, friends, and adoring fans of some kind? The lottery winner? The NFL MVP? The celebrity of stage and screen? The technology billionaire? The difficulty with such a definition is that so very few of us can ever meet it. If that's what it means to be fortunate or blest, which of us can lay claim to that?

Jesus teaches us, as his students and disciples, a different way to understand who is fortunate, who is blest. In fact, they are the very kinds of people we would *hesitate* to consider fortunate, and the very kinds of people who we likely *are*, at one time or another. Who is blest? The poor in spirit. The grieving. Those who hunger and thirst for justice. Those who are pure in heart. Those who are meek. Those who run into trouble. All the people we may not necessarily want to be, but sometimes are. All the people who don't look like successful stories of good fortune and blessing in our world's eyes. But, God sees us differently. When we are in these situations, we are blest, because God is with us, bringing healing, comfort, inspiration, fullness. Those considered

fortunate by worldly standards so often are unaware of their need for God or of God's presence; those who are broken or living a life that goes against worldly values, generally are very aware of their need for God and of God's presence. They are blest. *We* are blest. Jesus says so! Even if our values seem hopelessly naïve by the world's standards, or we take a gentle approach instead of bullying, or we are grieving, or we seek after what seems an impossible ideal, or we are troubled; we are blest. God is with us. Jesus teaches us to evaluate differently than the world does, as far as who is blest and who *we* are called to be, in order to *be* a blessing.

On then to Micah 6, where we come upon a kind of legally-styled controversy between God and people of Israel, back in the 7<sup>th</sup> C. BCE in the southern kingdom of Judah, in which Micah acted as a prophetic voice of God. In this chapter God has essentially charged Israel as a nation as having forgotten the essentials of their faith in favor of paying lip service and offering grand, ritualistic sacrifices. What does God actually ask of his people? Just this: "The Lord has shown you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with your God." God, Micah declares, doesn't want burnt offerings, worship without sincerity or over-the-top ritualistic gestures. God's requirements had been and were still clear and simple: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly.

So, let's unpack that short, but profound, verse. What does it mean to "do justice"? Especially for us, your average citizen, who isn't a part of a legal system or in a government post? What *is* justice, in Biblical terms? Think for a moment about how justice is most popularly portrayed as an image, and you'll find the answer. Our national mall in Washington DC has been in the news recently, and when Phil and I visited there a

few years ago now, I was impressed by the numerous depictions of justice in statuary and paintings, whether on the grounds of the Supreme Court or the Justice Building or in the National Art Gallery. How is justice portrayed? Most frequently as a classical female form, standing with a pair of scales in one hand, and a sword in the other, and blindfolded. It may or may not interest you to know that this depiction dates back to the ancient Egyptians, thousands and thousands of years ago. From them to the Romans, and from the Romans to the western world, Lady Justice was a goddess like figure. The blindfold, of course, represents objectivity; justice shows neither favoritism nor prejudice. The sword does not represent violence, but is the power of reason and truth. And the scales are representative of the notion of restoring proper balance, of fairness, of weighing the evidence. Another Biblical prophet, Amos, uses the image of the scales of justice, and to this day, we toss that phrase around: the scales of justice. Biblically speaking, as well as in much of the world at large, justice involves weighing things out and restoring the balance. But, again, how can we be a part of restoring the right and fair balance to the world? I find that an overwhelming notion, especially in the present world. So, maybe rather than being overwhelmed, it's as simple as this: every time you recycle, you are seeking to restore the balance between nature and humanity. Every little green step you take is a way of restoring balance to the cosmos, tiny though it may be. And every donation you make to the food shelf is a way of restoring economic balance and food justice among people. Every quilt sent to a developing nation is an effort to restore a balance of warmth and goods on a global scale; a small effort, yes; but an effort. Our democratic process is based on the notions of justice and fairness. And if you voted and participated in that process or in some other way, you are looking to maintain a

system that attempts to redress the imbalances and injustices that very naturally arise in any human community. “Do justice”, God asks. You don’t need to get a law degree or put on a powdered wig; just keep finding those small ways to restore the fair and right balance in our world.

We are also asked to love kindness. Kindness lacks glamour, but it makes all the difference. We know what kindness is, I think---we certainly know when we receive it, and I think we seek to practice it with others. But, consider these three quotations from three quite different sources. Henry James, the famed British author, once told his nephew: “There are only three things that are important in human life. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind.” The Dalai Lama, leader of the Buddhist world, has said, “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.” Christ epitomized kindness in his words and actions. “Treat one another”, he taught in the Golden rule, “as you would like others to treat you.” We are asked by God to love kindness.

Finally, we are asked to walk humbly with our God. I always feel the need to remind us that humility is not the same as being a door mat or indulging in demeaning one’s self. Humility is about perspective. Here is a favorite example of gaining perspective and humility of mine, involving president Teddy Roosevelt. One of Roosevelt’s friends, William Beebe, the naturalist, used to tell this story about the president: At Sagamore Hill, after an evening of talk, the two would go out on the lawn and search the skies for a certain spot of star-like light near the lower left-hand corner of the Great Square of Pegasus. Then Roosevelt would recite: “That is the spiral galaxy in Andromeda. It is as large as our Milky Way. It is one of a hundred million galaxies. It

consists of one hundred billion suns, each larger than our sun.” Then Roosevelt would grin and say, “Now I think we are small enough! Let’s go to bed.” Humility isn’t demeaning ones’ self; it’s just recognizing that God and the universe are much, much bigger than us, and that we have a place that matters, but it’s not all about us. God is God, and we are not. Walk humbly with God, we are asked.

So, this morning, in January of 2017, along the Shores of Lake Superior, God meets us where we are, and we are given what we need: an alternative vision of the world, as seen through the eyes of God. We are called to recognize who is truly blest, and how we are blest even when broken. And we are called to recognize that even in a gray and overwhelming world, God has some simple directives for us to follow: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Amen.