

Sixth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/C): "Blessings or Woes?"
Jeremiah 17:5-8; Luke 6:17-26
February 15-16, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

No fear, no anxiety: when's the last time you felt that way? Not afraid at all, not the least bit unsettled, not just a little nervous about **anything**? 'Sounds like Paradise, right? A state of mind and heart we're not apt to experience this side of Heaven?

But this weekend's reading from Jeremiah gives the key to freedom from fear and an antidote to anxiety:

*Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is the LORD.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
In the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.
Jeremiah 17:7-8*

I used to subscribe to an on-line devotional called *Morning Whispers*. It included a verse or two of Scripture, a related photo (usually of nature), and one or two sentences of reflection. This is the devotion I printed and filed away for Jeremiah 17:8:

Knowing where we are rooted gives us confidence
to face the challenges we encounter daily.
God's grace will sustain us when we feel depleted.
Drink deeply without hesitation.¹

"God's grace will sustain us when we feel depleted." Now, that's truth that needs to be trumpeted! It reminds me of last week's passage from 2 Corinthians, the Lord's response to Paul's plea to be relieved of the thorn in his side:

...[The Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in your weakness. So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (2 Corinthians 12:9)

“God’s grace will sustain me when I feel depleted, God’s grace will sustain me when I feel depleted,” **if I trust** in the Lord, **if** I can loosen my death grip on the steering wheel of my life, **if** I can let go and let God, **if** I can keep my eyes on Jesus and not get distracted by the storm all around me.

When I overdose on the news, my hope shrivels up. I have to remind myself to keep a healthy balance between current events and Scripture. That way Good News (capital G, capital N) can put bad news in perspective.

Not that Scripture **always** sounds like good news. We’ve heard the beatitudes from St. Luke’s Gospel today. They’re less well known and less loved than St. Matthew’s version, probably because they cut more deeply into the hearer. St. Matthew only has “**Blessed** are you’s”; he doesn’t include any “**Woe** to you’s,” like St. Luke.

I listen to the Woes and I feel uncomfortable, realizing that **I am rich**, not poor: I am a U.S. citizen, I know how to read, I live indoors, I eat whenever I am hungry and drink whenever I am thirsty, I have a family, I have a husband and child, I have friends, I have a community of faith, I have a career I love and not just a job that earns me a paycheck. On all these counts, I am rich not poor; because of these blessings I am full not empty; people speak well of me instead of talking smack; therefore I tend more toward laughter than tears.

I’m more comfortable with *The Message* version of St. Luke’s beatitudes in which the woes are presented like this:

²⁴ ... it’s trouble ahead if you think you have it made.
What you have is all you’ll ever get.

²⁵ And it’s trouble ahead if you’re satisfied with yourself.
Your *self* will not satisfy you for long.

And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.
There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

²⁶ "There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.

The truth is, St. Luke has Jesus speaking to and about people who are actually economically poor, not just poor in spirit, like in St. Matthew. Jesus is addressing people whose bellies hurt because their stomachs are empty, not just those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness," like in St. Matthew. He's talking to and about people who can't feed themselves or their children, people who sleep without a roof over their heads, people without land on which to grow food or raise sheep, folks without access to health care or education or hope.

The reality is that there are increasing numbers of people like that all around us. Federal funding freezes and cuts have decimated Lutheran Social Ministries, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (now called Global Refuge) and I-RISE, the non-profit through whom our Afghan families are being settled, asylees helped, veterans housed. Before our very eyes, the flood of humanity that is homeless, hopeless, hungry, sick, and stateless is growing exponentially. Just as Jesus' sermon in His hometown synagogue in Nazareth is referred to as His inaugural address, this Sermon on the Plain has been called a "major policy address"² of Jesus. In it He makes promises to those who suffered in His century and to those who suffer in ours:

*You're blessed when you've lost it all.
God's kingdom is there for the finding.*

*You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.
Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.*

*You're blessed when the tears flow freely.
Joy comes with the morning. (Luke 6:20-21, The Message)*

Jesus is promising that God's kingdom **will** come to the last, the lost and the least, and God's will (that **all** God's children enjoy abundant life) **will** be done, ultimately. God will make it happen, even if we don't, but if we, who are rich, and we, who are full, and we, who are so materially blessed, don't mobilize on behalf of those who aren't, woe to us....

Here's Luther's explanation of the 2nd petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come": "In fact, God's kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us." (We might add, "and through us, by God's grace.")

Here's his explanation of the 3rd petition, "Your will be done": "In fact, God's good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us." God has Kingdom work for us to do. Will we be faithful?

Going back to the beginning: if we're going to be afraid or anxious, let's make it fear or anxiety that we're part of the problem and not part of the solution! Our assigned psalm this weekend is Psalm 1, a perfect pairing with the Jeremiah passage. It tells us that those whose *"delight is in the law of the LORD... [who] meditate on God's teaching day and night... are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper."* (Ps. 1:2-3) God's teaching in Micah 6 is that we should *"Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with [our] God.* May our hearts be trusting and our lives be fruitful in the Lord's sight, for our neighbor's good, for our soul's sake, and to God's glory. Amen

¹John Gaudreau, *Morning Whispers*, www.perfectpeaceandjoy.org, May 21, 2018.

²David L. Tiede, *Luke, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1988) p. 139.

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