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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

The Blessing Breathed by the Living God

Matthew 5:1-12

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

Oh, Beloved, let us begin, first, with a breath together. Let us breathe in, and let us breathe out, together. In the beginning, the breath of God moved over the waters. At the church's beginning, the breath of God whooshed through the upper room. The Spirit is here, and let us breathe deep this breath of God. So many of us have slowly turned our shoulders, our backs, into tables, heaping on them the troubles that fill our screens, our newsfeeds, our lives. Beloved, we are all carrying heavy burdens. We read today the Beatitudes, these counter-cultural words of blessings, but today something about this text feels different. It feels different because we have seen their faces, these who Jesus calls blessed. They are our neighbors. We have seen them on the news, their likeness captured on one of the worst days of their lives. And Jesus says, blessed, blessed. We cannot secure these blessings for ourselves, but this word of blessing is a promise that God is working in the world. And so, let us breathe, breathe deep the breath of God in our midst.

This is syllabus day for Jesus's disciples. Jesus sees the crowds who have already begun to follow him, and he's gone up the mountain, and the disciples come to him. By the time he finished speaking, in two chapters, the crowds are there, again, astounded at his teaching. But it does seem, at least right now, that maybe these are words of orientation for his disciples.

For the last half-chapter so so, Jesus has been using John's refrain: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Maybe he's tweaked it a little bit, adding, at least in some

contexts, an invitation to follow him. And now, it seems, he's trying to tell them what it means. Who is invited into the kin-dom? Who is it for? What does it do?

The setting of these words is more than Jesus, the disciples, the mountaintop, the crowds on their way. There is the gospel story so far, where the visit of foreign sages sets off a massacre at the hands of the local tyrant. There is the infant Jesus and his family sent off into an exile, the call and response of the Babylonian captivity of the past and the fall of Jerusalem—still to come for the gospel's characters, but a reality that is the present for the gospel's first audience. Matthew's audience is every bit as adrift as many of us feel we are today. They know the competing message about how to be secure and happy.

In this context, these words of blessing are intense. In Luke's gospel, Jesus names the poor, the hungry, the weeping, emphasizing the blessing as counter-cultural, in that we generally assume that blessings, happiness, are for those who are secure, privileged, wealthy, healthy, carefree. But in Matthew's gospel, Jesus's gospel, these blessings are a strong pronouncement against the script, the assumptions that gives strength to the powerful. Jesus states with clarity that the blest ones are those who poor in spirit—the discouraged, the downtrodden. The blest are the grieving, the humiliated, the agitated, the empathetic, the naive. The blest are the ones who proclaim peace in a world bent on violence. The blest are the ones pursued by tyrants and despots. On these, Jesus pronounces—not some legalistic instruction, not some required performance, not a prerequisite for God's grace, but Jesus breathes blessing on them, and let us who uncertain, tired, overwhelmed, let us, too, breathe in this blessing, too.

When Rome launched its campaign against Jerusalem, there was a lull in the fighting. The Emperor Nero died, and the Roman general leading the charge, Vespasian, returned to Rome to secure the throne for himself. The lull allowed for recruiting in the Judean countryside. It also gave time for the factions who had united against Rome to turn in on themselves and fight each other. You can feel the push and pull the average person must have felt: this sense that safety and security depends on *your* actions; that the nation's blessings require *you* to do this or that. And, still, Jerusalem fell. Tens of thousands of people died; nearly a hundred thousand were enslaved, shipped far, far from Jerusalem.

And my point is that Matthew records Jesus talking about and to these very people, the ones who witnessed the deaths of their beloved, the ones left behind after their loved ones were deported, the ones far from home, and the ones still sifting through the rubble. The ones told that blessing is something defended, or earned, or won—Jesus breathes these particular blessings on them. This new kin-dom, which has come near, is for them.

This is the gospel to which we have pledged our very selves. A gospel that sees both the promises and demands of this world and boldly suggests there is another way. We may not always know how it works, *how* this blessing comes about. But what sustains us is *that* we know these blessings will come about. And so we breathe deep the breath of God, when we ache, when we wait, when we hope.

We turn to Jesus, to scripture, in the hopes that we will see instructions for how to live in these times, for how to secure blessings for ourselves in these times. And, to be quite frank, we won't find it. The Bible is not a how-to manual for this living of these days. We won't find the single verse that will silence our enemies, no clear passage for setting everything to right. Believe me, I wanted to find that this week. I wanted to bring it to you, to give you some relief, to enliven us for the work ahead. But it isn't there. No, but what we will encounter in these passages is nothing less than the living God, the crucified God whose desire is not destruction, but blessing.

But, perhaps, Beloved, there is something in that. In the reminder, that, in our baptisms and in this meal, in this space infused with the breath of God, we are called again and again as witnesses to the kin-dom, to call out, in the midst of everything that would defy God, that God is to be found among us, with us, always, even to the end of the age. Amen.