

Epiphany 6 – Year C

Decades ago a good friend went on a mission trip to Mexico. And one of the things that she told me about when she returned was her experience with the poor people living in the slums, the barrios, in the cities. These slums are typically down in the plains – while the rich have their huge, majestic homes built on the mountainsides. She told me that when she remarked on this to one of the people in the mission, he said to her, “Ah, but what a view for us, of those splendid buildings, and the beautiful mountains! And what a view for them, when they look out on the city and can see only our poverty, these slums. Who has the better view?”

Using our lens of the Epiphany Season – looking at this Gospel to see what Jesus is revealing to us about the nature of God, about what is at God’s heart, we have Jesus overturning assumptions about who God is and how God works... We have a long Epiphany Season this year – so we are hearing readings that we often miss when there are fewer “Sundays” in the Epiphany season.

Today’s gospel passage sounds a lot like a part of Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” – where we hear a longer version of the Beatitudes... Blessed are they, etc., etc. But this version from Luke is often called the “Sermon on the Plain.” You might have missed it, but in the very first line of today’s Gospel, we heard this: “Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place...” Jesus had been up on the mountain praying, and then had called the one’s Luke names as Apostles. And that’s where our gospel opens today – with Jesus coming down from the mountain to stand on a level place. A level place. We hear folks speak about wanting a level playing field, wanting everyone to be treated fairly, no one having an advantage. We wouldn’t think of having a sports venue where, for the 100-meter race one or two lanes were on level ground while the other lanes were uphill all the way. No, in sports we are so concerned that there not be an advantage based on the lay of the land that the teams switch goals halfway through a competition. Yes, we opt for level ground – a level playing field – at least in sports.

Everything else in our culture, though, encourages us, pushes us, to get *above* others. Make more money to achieve a *higher* standard of living. Get a *higher* degree! The prosperity gospel teaches that God *wants* us to have more, and so those who are really right with God *will have* more! Just look around and you can see that the “haves” are those blessed by God, and the have-nots are in the lowlands because, well, they are obviously not following the ways of God or they haven’t worked for it! There was a firm strain in Judaism that held that belief. That’s where the book of Job comes in, actually – putting that belief on trial. For Job was a good person, but all the good things of his life were taken from him. And when he had nothing, his former friends began to look *down* on him, to preach to him about all the things he was doing wrong that caused his misfortune. – No, in the ‘real’ world, we don’t even *like* equal, level ground. We want to be above some, so we can look down on others. We somehow think we can know our own worth only in relation to the worth of others. That person has more than I do, more power, more money, better stuff - but at least I have more than that poor bugger over there! That’s how the “powers of this world” work – how they drive wedges between people, between neighbors and nations.

But Jesus seeks out a level place – to tell us that God comes to us in our midst – and in the place where we are all on the same level. In the heart of God, there is no higher or lower. In the heart of God, the disciples, and “a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon” – the Jews *and* the Gentiles – in the heart of God, all belong, all are blessed.

The ones coming to Jesus were the dispossessed, the *op*-pressed, those who were the have-nots. You can almost hear the murmurs. Did I hear him right? Blessed are you who are poor? *I’m* in God’s kingdom? Indeed. We are; each and all of us.

But then Luke adds the “woes.” Woe to you who are rich, who are full, who have more than you need and laugh at the rest of the world, because all those things are empty. And they will leave you empty. Indeed. We are.

We could hear, in these woes, an echo of our first reading from Jeremiah:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,
whose hearts turn away from the LORD.

They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.

But the blessings are also here, in Jeremiah:

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.

Note that God's blessing does not keep trouble away – the heat will still come in the desert. But Jeremiah says -

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.

Why – because those who trust in God have their roots planted in God...in the living water.

The heat comes, and the drought, but the tree lives because of where its roots are.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us clearly that people may hate, exclude, revile and defame those who follow his way of living, who choose to live in the reign, the way of God. Social ostracism is the fate of the poor – and will be the fate of the followers of Jesus. But blessing is there, happiness is there, when one's roots are deep into the living waters of God.

But now let me throw a wrench into this neat package of blessings and woes... Both of them are for us.

It is too easy to take these readings about the blessed and the cursed and put ourselves self-righteously into the blessed camp - or beat ourselves up about our sinfulness and sit in woe.

God's all-inclusive nature is not about such dualism.

Each of us is part of that crowd gathered around Jesus – broken, oppressed, in need of healing. And Jesus says, you are safe and welcome here. The kingdom, the realm, the way, the heart of God is here with you. You belong!

But each of us also carries with us the aspects of privilege that Jesus warns may be the death of us. When we put our sense of self-worth into the hands of others instead of into the heart of God, we are in trouble. When we get consolation from our delusion that we are not like someone else, instead of from the fact that we are created by the same God who created that “someone else,” then we are in trouble. When we let our fear of others or fear of difference blind us to the presence of God in our midst, then we are in trouble.

What Jesus tells us about God's heart is that there we are all on the same level. We are not meant to be envious of or imitators of the rich and powerful as we wallow in our lowliness, but we are also not meant to look down on anyone else. We hear in today's readings the echo of Mary's Magnificat – also in Luke's Gospel: God has taken the mighty down from their thrones and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. – Hear it again from another scripture: Every valley will be raised up, and every hill made low. – God's heart is level ground... where we can look and see the face of God in one another.

That's enough to work on for a lifetime.

Amen.

- [Jeremiah 17:5-10](#) [1 Corinthians 15:12-20](#) [Luke 6:17-26](#) [Psalm 1](#)