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**Matthew 5**

### **America, the Beatitudes**

Strange.

If you go back and listen closely to his inaugural address, you may wonder if you have stepped into an alternative universe.

Everything looks the same. Except that everything is upside-down. A rug lying flat on the ceiling/ A chandelier hanging *up* from the floor.

Very strange.

If you go back and listen carefully to his inaugural address, you may ask yourself — Did he say that? Did he mean that?

I mean this is someone who has climbed to the top of the mountain. This is someone who has quickly acquired a huge following.

So, when it comes time for him to step up to the mic, you would expect him to do what any effective orator knows to do.

Assure your audience that you know how the world works — that you have a good handle on reality.

And start with something everyone knows. Start with some conventional wisdom — with something like:

Blessed are the rich. (Everyone knows that.)

Blessed are the self-confident. (Exactly.)

Blessed are the powerful. (Right.)

But that is not what Jesus does.

Not what he says.

What Jesus says is something else entirely — something strange.

The opening words of his inaugural address turn the world upside down.

Jesus leads with “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” And just like that, we are not in Kansas anymore.

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It's possible, I think, to miss the strangeness in all the blessedness here.

The Beatitudes are so familiar that we hardly stop to notice what they convey. Which is why I find it useful, in my study of Scripture, to dive into different translations of the Bible.

I have a CD set of the King James version. (Because I'm like that.) And for years, I have driven around listening to the British actor, Alexander Scourby, read me the Sermon on the Mount. So, I know how it's *supposed* to sound.

But I still enjoy breaking up the ice of the King's English. I still like to hear an old text in a new way. And the best ice-axe in my library is *The Message* — an idiomatic translation of the Bible by Eugene Peterson.

Here's what I mean.

Here are the Beatitudes as written in *The Message*.

*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope ....*

*You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.*

*You're blessed when you're content with just who you are — no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.*

*You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God ....*

*You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full, you find yourselves cared for.*

*You're blessed when you get your inside world — your mind and heart — put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.*

*You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate .... That's when you discover your place in God's family.*

*You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution .... Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort. And they are uncomfortable.*

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That is, in a sense, where Jesus starts. That's how he begins the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel.

And if you listen closely to what he says, you will probably have a few follow-up questions, like — How are they blessed? How are the ones who are NOT winning the game blessed?

It sounds like Jesus is rhetorically rounding up all the losers and saying, “No worries. We’ve got this.”

But what makes him so sure?

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Well, whatever it is, it seems to have something to do with us and a lot to do with God.

Jesus radiates confidence.

Confidence is the official language of faith.  
Confidence — *con fidere* — with faith.  
It’s the language Jesus speaks.

We hear “confidence” spoken throughout all four Gospels. But perhaps no where more clearly than here in the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are snapshots of confidence in our potential and in God’s goodness.

And the story these pictures tell is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow:

God’s love surrounds us and will sustain us.  
God is with us and will not abandon us.

So, no — the Beatitudes are not prescriptive. Jesus is not saying, “Be mournful.” That would just be weird.

And no — the Beatitudes are not rules to obey.

These blessings are beacons of hope that help us find our way through the bleak midwinter:

YOU ARE LOVED.  
YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Life-giving words of blessing for those who may not feel so lively or blessed.

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Now, I know there are people here this morning who feel the bleakness of the past week. People with deep concerns about the moves some of our nation’s leaders have made.

More than a few emails this week, my friends. More than a few phone calls and face to face conversations.

And I know these concerns are held by others beyond these walls.

On Thursday night, Gwen and I heard from an Iranian friend who teaches religion at Middlebury College.

He is on sabbatical in Iran with his family.

Of course, there are now real questions about when, or whether, he and his family will be able to return to the States.

That family is like family to my family. Their younger daughter is like a sister to Rachael, our youngest.

So, we were overjoyed when we got word last month that somehow — from a great distance — they bought a house in our neighborhood. I hardly need to tell you that our eight-year-old can hardly believe her good fortune to have a buddy a few doors down.

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What will come of all this?  
What will come of this?

I don't know.

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And yet, if confidence is the language we speak, then I will put it this way:

Blessed are immigrants and refugees and our Iranian friends who seek a good life here, for they will be shown an extravagant welcome.

And blessed are they who cling to the hope of health insurance, for they will be well cared for.

And, blessed are they who practice bridge building, for they will see God in surprising faces and places.

And, blessed are they who will not stop speaking and tweeting truth to power, for we all know what sets us free.

And, blessed are they who are willing to risk something big for something good, for this gives meaning to life.

And, blessed are they who stride toward justice for all, toward compassion for all, toward kindness for all, for they are already walking with God.

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That's what I can say. Because that's all I have.

Just snapshots.

Just confidence.

Just hope.

Just love.

Just words. All these broken and blessed words.

Amen.