

On New Years Day, we launched something of a long sermon series, as every Sunday between now and Easter, we're reading and preaching our way through the Gospel of Matthew.

So on New Years' Day, we began at the beginning, with chapter 1 verse 1. We've read some of Jesus genealogy, as Matthew traces his ancestry back through 42 generations, linking Jesus to some of the central figures of the Hebrew Scriptures like David and Ruth and Abraham. We've read the accounts of Jesus' baptism and his subsequent time of trial and temptation in the wilderness.

But you may have noticed that we've read through four of Matthew's 28 chapters, and Jesus hasn't said very much yet. If you've got one of those red letter bibles, the ones where the words of Jesus are set in red type, there's not much red ink at all in these opening chapters. But starting today, all of that is about to change. Matthew is finished with the preliminaries and back story. It's time for us to hear directly from Jesus himself.

And so in our story today, Jesus ascends a hill, and his disciples and the crowds follow him, and Jesus begins to speak.

So listen now for a Word from God from Matthew, chapter 5, beginning at verse 1.

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down,*

*his disciples came to him. Then 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 righteousness' sake, 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.*

*“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Jesus continues to speak for quite a while. His speech here carries on for the rest of chapter 5, and all of chapters 6 and 7 – the longest of Jesus’ speeches in Matthew’s gospel.

So viewed within the larger framework of Matthew’s gospel, biblical scholars argue that this speech that we’ve come to know as the Sermon on the Mount functions much like inaugural address - the first public speech given by a new leader.

But consider with me for a moment the setting for this particular inaugural address. Jesus doesn’t ascend high platform in the center of the seat of government -- he’s seated on an

unnamed hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. He’s not surrounded by powerful people -- he’s surrounded by fishermen, farmers, women and children. There are no waving flags or marching bands or military salutes, for no one in any position of real power has yet taken any notice of this itinerant rabbi.

If this is an inaugural address of a new leader, it already looks very different from the inauguration of any earthly ruler or leader the world has ever seen before or since.

And I wonder what was happening in the minds of the people that crowded around Jesus there on that hillside. I wonder if they had expectations about what they were about to hear. Perhaps they were expecting soaring rhetoric about restoring Israel to its glory days from long ago, when Israel was ruled by powerful kings like Saul and David and Solomon. Perhaps they were expecting Jesus to lay out a plan for reviving the economy that had become so stagnant and burdened under Roman tax policies and militarization. Perhaps they were expecting Jesus to issue a call to take up arms and do violence to the powers that be.

Whatever rhetoric or slogans or catchphrases or memes they were expecting, they got this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for

righteousness. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers

I imagine Peter, who had only been one of Jesus' disciples for about five minutes but probably already envisioned him as Jesus' campaign manager future chief of staff, must have been sitting there thinking, Really, Jesus? This is how you want to begin your big speech? Really, Jesus? This is the kind of vision you want to cast for your kingdom?

Yes, exactly, Jesus seems to be saying. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Because these are the kinds of people who draw God's attention.

To be blessed, Jesus seems to say, means that you've drawn God's attention.

And Jesus seems to say that marching bands and flags and dignitaries are all fine and good, but God does not find them terribly impressive. Jesus seems to say that having all the fanciest things that money can buy and being considered an influencer is not nearly as impressive to God as those who are meek and merciful. Jesus seems to say that the God who defeated Pharaoh and his charging chariots by blowing back the waters of the sea is not terribly impressed with the latest in military

technology, but God is deeply attentive to those are doing the hard work of peacemaking in their communities and homes and families.

To be blessed is to draw God's attention, Jesus seems to say in his inaugural address. And these are the kinds of people, says Jesus, who draw God's attention: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.

And so here's the good news, my friend. You don't have to be young or strong or wealthy or well-connected to draw God's attention. In the kingdom of God, you need not have it all together or have it all figured out in order to be blessed.

My friend, God's love for you is so much bigger, so much deeper, so much stronger than you or I could ever imagine, not because of anything you've done or not done, not because of anything you've said or not said, but because of who God is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

There's only so much fame and fortune and power in this world to go around. Only a precious few people attain those things in this world.

But here's some more good news. In the kingdom of God, fame and fortune and power aren't nearly as important as righteousness and mercy

and peace. In the kingdom of God, everyone can be great, because in the kingdom of God, the way up is down. In the kingdom of God, the way to climb to the top is to move yourself to the bottom. In the kingdom of God, the way to become the greatest is to become the least of all and the servant of all. In the kingdom of God, you can achieve greatness, my friend, because in the kingdom of God, everybody serves.

And so, my friend, when you serve, when you give, when you do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with your God, when you show mercy and make peace, blessed are you.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.