

Jesus' Inaugural Address

Matthew 5:1-12 (NRSV)

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.

On Wednesday, Joseph R. Biden, Jr was sworn in as 46th President of the United States. He gave a 21-minute inaugural address that outlined his vision for the next four years. You could sum it up in a word: Unity.

His speech was followed by the inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman, our nation's first Youth Poet Laureate. She gave a rousing poem echoing President Biden's vision of togetherness and democracy prevailing.

Inaugural addresses and poems provide an opportunity to cast visions and dream dreams – to share hopes and expectations – to focus on the big picture and offer a glimpse of a different reality. This morning I invite you to listen to and think about another inaugural address. This one comes from Jesus of Nazareth and it's found in Matthew's Gospel.

Like Biden, but without the Covid-safe practices, a crowd gathered to listen to Jesus. He was teaching, preaching and healing people throughout Galilee. His fame was spreading far and wide. A great crowd was following him as he traveled. Matthew says "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 ..."

Now in case you miss the verbal clues, the author is telling us: "Listen up. Take notes. This is important stuff." Whenever someone ascends a mountain in the Bible something momentous happens. Think about it. Moses goes up on Mt. Sinai, receives the Ten Commandments and the Israelites are given a vision carved in stone for living as God's people. Matthew wants us to connect these two events. Jesus represents the new Moses with a new vision of life and faith.

The significance of moment is also emphasized because Jesus assumed the classic posture of a Jewish rabbi. He sat down. The disciples approached him. He opened his mouth and taught. Since there weren't podiums or microphones or TV cameras in those days, when a religious leader spoke with authority, he sat down and others gathered around to listen.

When I visited the Holy Land in 2010, we went to this traditional site outside of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. Today there's a beautiful church that was built between 1936-1938. The floor

plan is octagonal, the eight sides representing the eight Beatitudes. The church is Byzantine in style with marble veneer on the lower walls and gold mosaic in the dome.

Our guide took us to the back side of the church and pointed to a large natural shaped bowl that stretched down the hillside. She said that we usually imagine Jesus sitting at the top of the hill and speaking down to the crowd. But it's more likely that he sat at the bottom of the hill and used the natural contour of the land and breezes off Lake Galilee to broadcast his words up the hill.

Jesus entire inaugural address is recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7. We call it the Sermon on the Mount and it will be the focus of our Lent bible study. I encourage you to sign up for a study guide today. This morning we're going to focus on the opening lines - a group of eight proverb-like sayings that we call the Beatitudes.

Each verse begins the same: "Blessed are ...," and what follows is a description of life in God's kingdom. These sayings are very significant because "Jesus is giving us a picture of a whole new world, a new life, a new reality. Here is a sermon that calls us to another place where we might go with Jesus." (William Willimon)

Like the points outlined in the President's address, Jesus points us towards living into the reign of God. Jesus directs us to look into the distance to a new destination. He says, "We're going on a journey. We're working toward something wonderful."

Jesus invites us to leave behind our view of the world where we only see what is broken and torn, hate-filled and violence scarred. He asks us to leave behind the tangled nets of loneliness, persecution and grief. He offers us a picture of a new reality where we live our lives in, with and for God.

Jesus is saying if you really want to see kingdom of God, take the world as you know it and turn it on its head. Imagine a world free of the tyranny, poverty, loneliness, and greed. Imagine a world without ignorance, arrogance, and indifference. Imagine the hungry fed and the just vindicated. Imagine the poor satisfied and the pure sanctified. Imagine the reviled accepted and persecuted affirmed. Imagine a world governed by compassion and love rather than the will to power.

Imagine it all because that's what God imagines, because that's what the people God deems blessed, and because that's what God wants us to make of ourselves. Jesus says imagine such a world, and then, live accordingly. Live this world into being. Live as though the world is already turned upside down - and when you do you will see and experience God's kingdom.

There's a picture of how this works in Joseph F. Girzone's novel Joshua. He tells the story of Jesus as a contemporary wood artist with the Hebrew name of Joshua. Joshua moves into a small house on the edge of a fictional town called Auburn. He lives very simply, very openly, and with kindness and generosity toward everyone. Suspicious at first because he is a strange with ways unlike their own, the townspeople eventually come to like and admire him.

One day a Jewish factory owner, Aaron Fahn, speaks to him about the way he is, and wants to know how he came to be that way. Joshua wants to know why he asks. Aaron says, "Because I can't understand how anyone could develop the vision of life that you have. It is so foreign to my way of thinking, and so different from the thinking of everybody I know."

"Each person," says Joshua "looks at life through a different vision. Three (people) can look at a tree. One will see so many board feet of valuable lumber worth so much money. The second will see it as so much firewood to be burned, to keep (a) family warm in the winter. The third will see it as a masterpiece of God's creative art, given as an expression of God's love and enduring strength, with a value far beyond its worth in money or firewood. What we live for determines what we see in life and gives clear focus to our inner vision."

Aaron asks, "Who taught you to think that way?" "It is what I see," says Joshua. "You could see it, too, if you could detach yourself from the things you were taught to value. They do not give you peace, nor do they give you lasting satisfaction. They leave you empty and filled with a longing for something more."

Aaron admits that is true, but wants to know how Joshua knows it. "I know how (we were) made," says Joshua, "... I understand what (we) really need if (we are) to grow and find peace." (New York: Macmillan Co., 1987, p. 67).

The Beatitudes are God's vision and dream for living. They're a statement of how we're really made and what we should be focusing our lives on. Trappist monk Brendan Freeman puts it this way "the Beatitudes "draw our hearts out of themselves into a new way of understanding our lives (and our world)...they are deliberately incomplete. They await the inclusion of our lives. Each person fills in the blank space with the details of his or her own life situation."

So what are we to do, those of us who want to follow Jesus, those of us who desire to serve God's kingdom in this time of pandemic and death, in this time of hunger and unemployment, in this time of white supremacy and political extremism, in this time of lies masquerading as the truth? What gestures do we make? What commitments do we keep? What risks do we take?

The late William Sloane Coffin, minister at the prestigious Riverside Church in NY City used Robert Frost's famous phrase, "a lover's quarrel with the world" to describe Christianity. He said, "We...must carry a lover's quarrel with the world, so that when.... we depart this life, we leave behind a little more truth, a little more justice, a little more peace, a little more beauty, than would have been there had we not cared enough about the human race to quarrel with it, not for what it is but for what it yet might be. Let our prayer be 'Oh, God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire! Amen.'"

May that be our prayer in 2021 as we live God's blessed lives in this world!

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