

16 February 2025

Sermon by Isaac De Jongh.

The Lord be with you beloved.

May I speak to you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the sixth Sunday after Epiphany.

The theme for today is:

God's ways.

Readings:

Jeremiah 17: 5-10; Psalm 1; I Corinthians 15: 12-20; Luke 6: 17-26.

If you were asked to identify the greatest problem facing the human race today, you might answer, "global warming, racism and hate, income inequality, terrorism, international strife," or any number of issues that occupy the talking heads in the media. Chances are that no one will identify the human heart as the main problem at the core of all those other problems.

The central theme of all of the readings for day is the contrast between those who follow God's ways and those who don't. Jeremiah speaks of how those who turn away from God and trust in their own human strength are cursed, but those who trust in God are like trees planted near a river which are filled with life, green leaves and lots of fruit. This same metaphor is picked up in Psalm 1, where those who trust in God's law and follow it are like healthy, living trees, while the wicked are cursed. In Luke Jesus speaks of how those who are poor, hungry, and weeping are blessed by God, while those who are rich, prosperous, laughing, and praised will experience sorrow. It is significant that Jesus' definition of blessing and curses, and what brings about those conditions, is very different from the Old Testament picture, or at least how those Old Testament pictures are usually interpreted. Finally, Paul compares those who believe in resurrection with those who don't, declaring that followers of Jesus who do not believe in a resurrection, or whose faith only has value for his life, are to be pitied, but those for whom resurrection is a reality, know that faith reaches beyond our current mortal life. Ultimately, all of these passages call us to a choice between trusting our own strength, wisdom, and ways of being, or embracing the way of Jesus.

Jeremiah 17: 5-10

Jeremiah 17 contrasts the cursed and the blessed: "Cursed is the one who trusts in mere mortals, who depends on flesh for his strength." Your life will be like a withered shrub in the

desert wilderness. Conversely, those who trust in the Lord will be blessed, like a tree planted by water that never withers, never fears a drought, and always blooms.

But Jeremiah seems to point there, when he opens this chapter by saying that “sin is engraved with an iron tool, inscribed with a flint point on the tablet of their hearts.” That hardened sin is why God is so harsh in his condemnation of Israel, as we heard in Isaiah 6:9-13 last week. Here in our text, Jeremiah says it’s not just that sin has hardened the human heart, but even more that the heart is “deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”

Psalm 1

Psalm 1 pronounces blessings on the righteous, who "do not walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers." Echoing Jeremiah, they will live like a tree planted by endless water: "whatever he does, he prospers." The wicked "are not so." They will be like the leftover husk blasted by a scorching wind.

1 Corinthians 15: 12-20

In 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, Paul forcefully argues that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, emphasizing that if Christ was not raised, then the Christian message is meaningless and believers have no hope for eternal life; the resurrection of Jesus serves as a guarantee of future resurrection for all believers, with Jesus being considered the "first fruits" of those who have fallen asleep in death, signifying the beginning of a new life to come for all who believe in him.

Luke 6: 17-26

Luke 6:17-26 presents a powerful "reversal of fortune" message from Jesus, where those typically considered blessed by society - the wealthy, full, and joyful - are instead warned with "woes," while the poor, hungry, weeping, and persecuted are declared "blessed" because they belong to God's kingdom, highlighting a radical shift in values and priorities that prioritizes spiritual richness over material possessions and societal status; it's a call to embrace suffering and hardship with hope, knowing that true fulfillment comes from aligning oneself with God's vision, even when the world may reject it.

You might be familiar with Henri Nouwen’s work. The Dutch Catholic Priest (1932-1996) wrote, taught, and served extensively on matters of spirituality, identity, pastoral ministry, and social justice. At the center of his life’s work was a desire for people to know their belovedness as children of God; in fact, much of his work revolves around this core message. Take, for instance, Nouwen’s [sermon at the Crystal Cathedral in 1992](#), where he discusses the central question that keeps us going as human beings: “Who am I?” In it, Nouwen outlines how we often answer this question in three ways: I am what I do; I am what other people say about me; and I am what I have.

I thought of this when I imagined the scene Luke depicts for his version of the Sermon on the Plain.

There are two ways the choice in today's readings can be seen to affect the world. On the one hand, the choice to follow Jesus is so often spiritualized (with Paul's resurrection discussion as a strong source of support for this view) such that many followers of Jesus choose to opt out of the world – in the sense that they shun anything to do with social justice, they deny that climate change is real, or, if it is, that it needs to be a concern, and their faith becomes about staying “separate” from “the world” in order to ensure a place in heaven (resurrection) when they die. On the other hand, and often in reaction to the former view, this choice is seen to entail either being “spiritual” or being “worldly” and, in order to follow Jesus' call for care of the poor, the broken, and the marginalized, all “spiritualized” concerns are either ignored or rejected. But there is a third way to approach this choice, which integrates all the ways the Scriptures may present it to us. Jesus preached and demonstrated that God's way is about what happens in this world now – caring for the least, and siding with the poor and marginalized. But Jesus also called us to a deep and living spirituality that trusts in God's Spirit, and not just our own capacity, and that believes that what we do now has eternal impact and consequence. That eternal impact cannot just be getting us to heaven, or we are just selfish people. So, it must also have to do with participating in God's ongoing work of resurrection, of bringing the entire cosmos into the fullness of God's life. The call then is for us to be both mystics who are deeply connected to the reality of God's presence and purpose, and who seek to participate in the eternal saving work of God, and activists who are deeply connected to the world in which we live, to the daily realities of injustice and evil, and who seek to participate in the immediate saving work of God within our human, temporal world. If we can do this right – and avoid the other possible choice, which is to ignore God's call altogether – then we, and all those with whom we work and live, will know the benefit of a more just and compassionate way of being, while also celebrating the future hope of a cosmos that is one and whole in Christ.

On the local level, it can be very tempting to turn the choice in today's readings into a simple decision for or against Jesus. It could be a simple evangelical message that seeks a “decision for Christ” and brings people into the church. But to reduce today's message to this overly simple choice would be to do a great injustice to the Scriptures. We could choose, rather to offer a more nuanced and challenging choice. Not just a choice for Jesus, but a choice that calls us to choose *what kind of Jesus we will follow*. Will we make Jesus simply a good man who worked for the good of his society, and make following him simply about being good people? Or will we make Jesus a substitute who removes any guilt or responsibility from us and simply guarantees us a place in a future heaven? Or – and hopefully this is what we will choose – do we offer a Jesus who connects us to the God who is the source of life, beauty, truth and goodness in the world, who offers us a future hope of a resurrection life that fills the cosmos, and who also calls us to engage daily in the tough work of living with kindness, compassion, justice, peace,

generosity, and love now? When we speak of blessing and curses, do we present them as God's actions, coming from outside of our human reality, and imposed on us by a distant divine being? Or do we present them as consequences of how we live now with one another, and as the results of trusting that God's way really is the best way to move the entire universe a little closer each day to experiencing the fullness of resurrection life? I hope that we will have the courage to present the Gospel choice that is deeply challenging, transformative, and practical, while also being deeply spiritual and aware of the eternal purpose of God.

Jesus is speaking to the disciples, even though the crowd is obviously listening in, and has, in fact, come to listen to Jesus teach. It's a layered invitation that is applicable to each of the groups listening.

Without saying it forthrightly, Jesus' list of blessings and woes names some of the very fundamental views of human self-identity: who am I? Am I what I have? Am I what I do? Am I what people say about me?

In his words, we hear various answers to the "Who am I?" question: I am *poor*, I am *hungry*, I am *weeping*, I am *rejected and ridiculed*. I am *rich*, I am *content with myself*, I am *laughing about my success*, I am *someone who everyone admires*... Or, as Nouwen summarizes: I am what I do (weep or succeed); I am what I have (plenty or not enough); I am what people say/think about me (good or ill, truth or lies).

Underlying the blessings and the woes is a necessary understanding about connection. Disciples have chosen the "right" connection: they have left jobs and a way of life to learn from their rabbi; they have chosen to identify with Jesus. The crowds who have come to hear and to be healed have come for the moment, but *to disciple is for life*. Being a disciple is, truly, an answer to the question, "Who am I?"

As identities, the descriptions we use are deeply rooted in us; they describe the connection we hold with what we believe to be true (positively and negatively). Nouwen's desire for people to know that they are the beloved of God was for a purpose. Along with being extremely biblical, it is also life-giving, worldview transforming, and purpose shaping. In other words, it is exactly what every invitation from God in Scripture is: an invitation to be rooted in Christ and God.

God sees you, whether you are poor or rich, and Christ names your poverty or your wealth for what it is. Jesus isn't encouraging you to get rich or become poor. Jesus is inviting you to put everything at his disposal and follow him. He sees you. He knows you – the real you, not the good face you put on so others will think well of you.

God sees you, and will stand with you on the level place. When it is hard to see, when things are going south for you, when you are experiencing the kind of suffering and hardship that happens on the level places of life, Jesus is standing there with you, sending healing power your way.

God sees you, and wants to bless you. There isn't anything you can do to change that. Nothing you do can make God love you less, and nothing you do can make God love you more. God

won't give up on you. God's blessing is for you whether you come from holy Jerusalem, or from the pagan coastlands of Tyre and Sidon. Whether you've been a Christian all your life, or you're a heathen who just wants Jesus to make you whole, Christ pronounces God's blessing on you. This doesn't necessarily mean you won't struggle. But it does mean you can live through whatever struggle life brings you, knowing Christ is with you, and your reward is great in heaven.

Throughout Luke's gospel, the emphasis is on God with Us – Emmanuel. Jesus stands on a level plain with us, showing us God's Kingdom in the middle of our chaos, in the middle of our need for healing. The only question is whether we will reject such amazing grace, or be willing to stand in that level place with Jesus and receive God's blessing. Amen.