

SERMON, Grace Episcopal Church, Keswick

4th Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A, February 1, 2026

Micah 6:1-8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18-3; Matthew 5:1-12

While thick ice may keep us from worshipping in person today, our scriptures are thicker yet with passages both memorable and everlastingly true. In times like ours when human dignity is in peril, when nations are abandoning the rules-based order, when the strong do whatever they want and the weak suffer the consequences, God's word steadfastly points our compass needle to true North both morally and spiritually – as it always has and will in every age of rupture and repair. These days we really need to keep our eyes on that ever-fixed mark.

As you read again the Beatitudes and Blessings (from Matthew's gospel) that Jesus speaks to the crowds at the beginning of his public ministry to redeem the world, I wonder which of them most touches your heart today? Do you most identify with those who are poor in spirit or who weep and mourn? Those who hunger and thirst? Those who are merciful and pure in heart? Those who are peacemakers or persecuted?

When I look out upon the state of the world and see chaos looming from high and low places in every news cycle as never before in my lifetime, I can't help but think that we all must weep and mourn and feel dispirited sometimes. Yet I also remind myself that God has been aware of our frail human condition all along, and that Christ steps into human flesh with enormous empathy for our plight and determination to save the world.

Each condition that Jesus describes and blesses in his short sermon is an attribute of the people He came to serve and form as His followers. They (and we) become the church down through the ages facing every conceivable challenge that He came to address. The blessing he bestows on each and all contains the promise that they are being rewarded the kingdom of heaven. "Theirs IS the kingdom of heaven," He says repeatedly. He doesn't merely say the kingdom of heaven WILL be theirs in the future tense, but that it IS theirs in the present tense, already theirs and ours.

No matter how much disintegration we may seem to pass through in this world of time and change, Jesus has already inaugurated the kingdom of heaven. It is already unfolding with His arrival on that hillside and His blessing of the disciples and crowds. The Holy Spirit he later sent into the church after his death and resurrection is part of His profound ongoing presence, until He ultimately comes

again at the end of time to complete His work of world redemption in the fulfillment of the kingdom of heaven. As we always say at the end of the Nicene Creed, “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.” While he inaugurated it on the hillside and sealed it in the cross and resurrection, we are now living in the in-between times, and its fulfillment is assured in the life of the world to come.

So despite the dizzying and sometimes troubling change around us, we are already blessed – truly blessed – to be guaranteed a place in His unfolding kingdom of heaven, and to be borne along on His shoulders and the faith of countless others, including each of you, as we navigate this roller coaster of life as best we can with His steadfast help.

For though the world changeth, God changeth naught. And the Beatitudes, full of Jesus’ deep love and blessings, are a true North on the Christian compass, an ever-fixed mark in which to place our trust in God’s compassion and promises that He conveyed so tenderly and assuredly to the crowds on that hillside.

But today’s first reading from the prophet Micah also contains a scriptural true North in times of great change and upheaval, when rupture is at hand and repair is essential. And it has remained a true North morally and spiritually for thousands of years under every imaginable condition.

There we see God has a “controversy” with his people, namely Israel at the time, but equally true of America as well as other nations on earth, for God’s judgement and standards still hang over all the nations. After reminding the people of all the ways they have been saved and liberated and led in covenant through God’s generosity to a promised land, their moral and ethical failings are still flagrant and widespread. It will not do to appease God merely through rituals and sin offerings. What God requires of them (and us) is “*do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.*” As the King James version translates this famous passage: “*What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*”

To put that faith into practice again may look like a tall order for each of us in today’s upside-down moral world, yet it is a foundational true North for the Christian who wants to be part of a good society and orderly world. God is everlastingly clear with us about this, and so for us there should never be any controversy or division about what God expects of us all. I know Grace Church is full of people who believe this and try to practice it. While we all fall short, we

keep trying with God's and each other's help, and our efforts are a much needed witness to others, and a source of repair in an age of rupture.

But of all key passages of scripture that remain a true North on the Christian compass, none can surpass St. Paul's statement in his letter to the church in Corinth. Here is where all faith and deeds originate for the Christian:

"We proclaim Christ crucified...The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

No matter how dark and threatening life gets, no matter how irreversible our personal or national or global circumstances may seem, no matter what is besieging us, there is a deeper reality lodged in God's purposes through Christ crucified that has set the world on a course of divine salvation that will not be thwarted by anything that evil can throw in its path.

Picture this for a moment. Picture yourself sitting in Grace Church for the burial service of someone you deeply love. Picture that person and your great love for him or her. Picture yourself surrounded by others there for this occasion as you all sit quietly in silence before the service begins. There you and a community sit holding such great love and loss simultaneously, in an atmosphere laden with keen awareness of our own powerlessness in the face of death. Suddenly everyone is asked to rise, and the words that fill that space of love and loss and longing - that will penetrate your ears and body, even as you watch your love's one body in a casket processing down the aisle behind a cross - come from the priest who follows right behind the body. Hear these bold and audacious words of our Lord as they resound throughout the sanctuary and penetrate every fiber of your being:

I am Resurrection and I am Life, says the Lord! Whoever has faith in me shall have life, even though he die. And everyone who has life, and has committed himself to me in faith, shall not die for ever.

As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth. After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger.

For none of us has life in himself, and none becomes his own master when he dies. For if we have life, we are alive in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord. So, then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's possession.

Happy from now on are those who die in the Lord! So it is, says the Spirit, for they rest from their labors!

Even at the grave we make our song! Once we have spaded earth upon the casket of our loved one now lowered into the grave, we boldly shout our Alleluias! The priest proclaims, “Alleluia! The Lord is risen!” And the people respond, “The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

My brothers and sisters in Christ, if Christians are audacious, it is all because the crucifixion and resurrection are ground zero! The whole story and ultimate outcome turns on these savings events. All true north compass points rest on His ground zero. We are all being borne along upon the shoulders of his death and resurrection, upon love divine and its power to transform us inwardly and outwardly. The course of the kingdom of God is already set in His life and death and resurrection, and we haven't far to go before His work is completed and fulfilled.

Meanwhile grab your spade or shovel, for there is work to do! Be strong in faith and courage. And hear this sweet profound prayer from St. Theresa of Avila as a little song to keep us all unafraid:

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. All things are passing away. God never changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God has nothing to lose. God alone suffices.

Offered to you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen