

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | SERMON

Jeremiah 17:5-10 | Luke 6:17-26 | The Rev. Catherine Healy | St. Paul & the Redeemer | February 13, 2022

Sometime last year, I finally got serious about backing up all my digital photos. Now I have an app on my phone that is desperate to make sure I don't forget a single moment from my past.

It sends me notifications at least once a day. "We've got a memory for you!" "Check out these highlights from two years ago."

Usually, I give in and look at them. And lately, those highlights from two years ago have been bittersweet.

In January and February 2020, I took so many pictures of what I assumed would always be ordinary life. A visiting friend, who flew in from out of town. Trips to the zoo and the children's museum. A million snapshots of the inside of this church, because I was still trying to get the hang of the way everything moved around for Lent.

If you'd asked me then what it meant to be "blessed," I would have given you a sound answer. I would have said that blessing doesn't depend on good things happening to you; it's not dependent on anything except your relationship with God. If you know God, if you invite God to be present in your life, you are blessed.

But looking back now, I'm not sure I believed it. I think I defined God's blessing through what we call the "blessings" of this life: the good things that happened to me, all reflected in those snapshots. It's not that my life was *perfect* two years ago. I had all the normal worries. I was busy and tired. But, essentially, I felt that God had blessed me because things were going fine.

My camera roll continues into March and April of that year. Suddenly, every picture is taken inside my apartment. The only subjects are the people who already live in my house. And interspersed with those are countless short video clips of me in my broom closet, with much shorter hair, saying, "Welcome to the virtual prayer desk of St. Paul & the Redeemer! Don't give up. Together, we'll get through this."

I can't say it's a thrill to go back and watch them. I look and sound how I felt: Not just busy and tired, but exhausted and afraid. I definitely don't look like I feel *blessed*.

The pandemic has been hard on all of us, no matter how much we try to count our blessings. Today's Scripture readings take this silent question and say it out loud: What does it mean to be blessed or cursed by God? Is God cursing us when our lives go sideways? Is there a way we can still call ourselves blessed when our worlds are falling apart?

If I'd had any sense, back in spring of 2020, I would have gone straight to the Beatitudes. Jesus gives a version of this sermon in two different Gospels. The best-known is in Matthew: the Sermon on the Mount. In today's reading from Luke, there's no mountain climbing involved, only level ground, so we call it the Sermon on the Plain.

The New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine calls this sermon one of his greatest hits. It's recorded twice, but it's more likely that Jesus gave it many times—that as his notoriety grew, and people started expecting him

as he traveled from town to town, they were eager to hear it. Instead of yelling, "Play 'Free Bird'!", you can imagine someone deep in the crowd yelling, "Do the one about 'Blessed are the poor!'"

And the people gathered in these crowds were the ones who most needed to hear the message, who most needed an upending of the belief we all find it a little hard to let go of: that God blesses us by making things go well, and curses us by making us poor or troubled or sick. It was the poor and troubled and sick who crowded in around Jesus.

Not the ones who were already doing fine.

None of us anticipated this sudden turn in world events, a pivot to a time when, suddenly, no one was doing fine. After months and now years of sickness and fear, we are all hungry for connection; we have all known despair and weeping. And yet Jesus calls us blessed.

Blessed are you who are poor because your hours have been cut.

Blessed are you who have been sick, and have only known the comfort of loved ones by FaceTime or phone.

Blessed are you who are persecuted for being too cautious, or not cautious enough.

Blessed are you who are exhausted and afraid, who have mourned and not been able to gather in mourning. Yours, too, is the kingdom of God.

Jeremiah tells us the only thing we need to be truly blessed is to put our trust in God, and then we will become like trees planted by water. It's not a promise that we won't face physical or spiritual drought, but that drought will not destroy us.

As I think many of you know, this is my last Sunday with you for a few months, as I prepare to go on parental leave. My excitement at welcoming our second child is, most days, stronger than my panic at bringing another child into this broken and hurting world. And so many of you have been so kind to me and my family, telling us, "What a blessing!"

It *is* a glorious blessing to welcome a new child. In these last days before I meet my son, I'm starting to wonder who he will be and what the snapshots from his memory will look like. I'm hoping so much that by the time he's old enough to remember, the pandemic will be far behind us—that he'll look at pictures from these last two years and feel confused by a world he will never have to know.

That's my hope, but that's beyond my control.

What I want for both of my children is, of course, what every parent wants—that they'll never know suffering, or pain, or fear, or discomfort—but I know that's not how life works.

Underneath that, my real hope and prayer for them is the same one I have for myself, and for all of us: that we find our blessedness not by pinning all our hopes on things going right, but by rooting ourselves in the love of God so that we become like trees planted by water.

We've lived together through a terrible drought, and more droughts may come. But they don't have to destroy us.

We have deep roots, and we nurture one another's deep roots. This is all it takes for us to be blessed.