

It's really a shame that Luke's Sermon on the Plain doesn't seem to garner nearly as much attention as Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. And it's not because they're really all that different in what they teach us, but it's because Luke goes to great lengths to not only report back Jesus' famous sermon, but enacts it in the way the story is told. It's not on a mountain that Jesus gives this sermon. It's on a level place – a plain if you will. And that's an intentional note on Luke's part. Because back in Luke, chapter 3, John the Baptist comes on the scene and declares, as the prophet Isaiah once did, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill be made low; the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth, so that all will see the salvation of God." But this isn't really about actual mountains and valleys. It's not a call to get your excavators out and start flattening earth all over the place.

Because in Luke chapter 4, which we read just a few weeks ago, Jesus declares, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, the freedom of the oppressed, and the beginning of the time of God's favor," again, taking the prophet Isaiah's words and directing them anew. You see, Luke has carefully and meticulously been building to this moment, leaving little topographical clues as to what God in Christ Jesus is up to in the world. And the Sermon on the Plain invites us to see what God is doing and also be a part of it today.

There are four sets of blessings and woes, a blessing to counter each woe, and yet also a stark contradiction in our minds of who is blessed and who is woeful. Blessed are the poor, woe to the rich. Blessed are the hungry, woe to the full. Blessed are those who weep, woe to those who laugh. Blessed are the hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed, woe to the ones who are spoken well of. There's something about all of this that sounds so familiar and yet, you can't help but feel like it's not right. Is Jesus saying we should try to be poor? That we should go hungry or weep or seek to be reviled, so that we can be blessed? Is he saying that we can't have wealth or food or laughter or even be liked by others?

No. I don't believe that's Jesus' point. Jesus is not giving a prescription here. He's not saying, "Do this and your reward is this." Rather, Jesus is stating the realities of the Kingdom of God. This is what the Kingdom of God is like and it stands in complete opposition to the way the world often functions, either back in Jesus' time or in our time today. Because throughout time, the poor have never been seen as blessed. But to God, the beloved creator who made all things, blessed them, and declared creation to be very good, the poor are absolutely blessed. The disconnect is not in how God sees the world; it's that the world has become so disconnected from the vision that God laid out from the foundations of creation, a vision that declares all of life blessed.

The Sermon on the Plain is a promise, a promise for all people. Because contrary to the temptations we face so often today, life is not so clear cut. We are not so easily divided into two groups. We are not just blessed or just woeful. We are both. Because we live in a broken world and we are broken people, prone to seeking a leg up over and above anyone else we can. We live knowing the pains and suffering of life and yet even in those moments, we experience grace and love from God. Because we are blessed and we are woeful. That's our human condition.

We have worked hard to be where we are and to have what we have and we've learned all too well that if we give too much of that up, no one else will be there to support us. We've been convinced that it's everyone for themselves and that our chief priority should be to take care of ourselves and our loved ones first, making sure there's food on the table, even as we don't use it all. We hide behind a façade of laughter and smiles, pretending everything's alright and if everything's alright for me, then that's all that matters. We place our identity, our value, our worth on what others say and think about us. On the mountain, we're prone to turning in on ourselves, forgetting that we are not called to manage and tend and live life all on our own. And we're woeful because of it all.

We suffer from the pains and stresses and anxieties and worries of not having enough. And though we might have more than some, the world continually widens the gap between the haves and have nots, and we fear getting lost into the abyss. We hunger for righteousness to be done in the world, for things to be made right, for the end to suffering, not just for ourselves but also for others. We weep and cry and wail at the hardships and loss and pain that exists, sometimes seen and more often unseen by those around us because we've been taught we dare not impose our present tears upon another. In the valley, we feel we have no one to turn to and so we turn, even in a last ditch effort, back to God. And we are blessed in the midst of it.

But it won't always be this way. That's what Jesus is saying in his words and in the location of his Sermon on the Plain. Because in the Kingdom of God, the valleys of poverty and suffering and loss and mourning will be raised up, not to be exalted above all things, but to the plain. And the mountains? The mountains of richness will come down, not to be thrust into the valleys of poverty and suffering, but to the level place. Because the level place is where we see one another. The level place is where we realize that this vision of the Kingdom is not only a promise for the future, but an opportunity, and invitation to live differently today. The level place encourages us to see the complex humanity of each and every person, knowing that they too have lived on the mountains and in the valleys. The level place teaches us what it means to live with empathy and compassion, to act with love and grace and understanding. Because ultimately, the level place is where we see, finally and fully, that all, truly all, are blessed by God. Amen.