

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Wonderful News
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Isaiah 30:13-19; Matthew 5:1-12

She was lucky to be alive. She had lived with cardiomyopathy, a disease that was hardening the muscle of her heart, impairing its function, for years and it had been getting progressively worse. It made it more and more difficult for her to function in any meaningful way. Then one day her heart stopped. She collapsed to the floor of her kitchen. Fortunately, her daughter was home, found her, called 911 and then proceeded to perform CPR. The paramedics arrived in less than three minutes, revived her and took her to the ER. She was in intensive care for a couple of weeks, then rehab and finally home. She was grateful to be alive. But then the bills began to arrive. They totaled more than one-hundred-thousand dollars, and my friend and her husband had no insurance. Her husband worked as a motorcycle mechanic at a small shop that offered no benefits. My friend could not work because of her heart condition. They had no way to pay. A short time later she called me in tears. I wondered what else could have happened. I asked her what was wrong. Her response stunned me. “John,” she said, “There is nothing wrong. My bills have all been forgiven.” It turns out that the hospital’s foundation had decided to pay her bills and those of her doctors. She saw it as a miracle. I saw it as wonderful news.

Wonderful news. Have any of you ever had wonderful news? And by that I don’t just mean good news; good news that we got into the school we expected to get in to. Or good news that our stock portfolios have increased. Or good news that I got the promotion I was expecting. No, when I say wonderful news, I mean the kind of news you were not expecting at all in the midst of difficult times? Over the years people have shared wonderful news stories with me. Wonderful news that seemed to come out of nowhere and out of impossible situations. And what I have discovered is that the level of wonderfulness of wonderful news is always in direct proportion to the difficulty of the circumstances out of which it arises. The gift of wonderful news is that it can sustain, empower and inspire us in tough times. And so this morning we will look at two stories in scripture that are about wonderful news. So, let’s get started.

The first story concerns the nation of Judah, of the Jewish people about seven-hundred years before the birth of Christ. Judah was a small, independent nation. Under King Hezekiah, it had done its best to be faithful to God in difficult circumstances. But now the nation faced assimilation or possible annihilation. Sweeping across their part of the world was the army of the neo-Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians, led by their king Sennacherib, were destroying every nation they encountered, and Judah was next. In desperation, Judah made a mutual defense pact with Egypt, even though the great prophet Isaiah warned them not to. The warning had been appropriate because prior to the Assyrian arrival, Egypt backed out of the pact. Judah was all alone. But then there came wonderful news from Isaiah. God spoke to the prophet and told him to deliver these words. *“Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you.”* And God did answer them. Before the Assyrians could take Judah, they withdrew because of conflict at home. Those words and God’s actions were wonderful news for the people of Judah.

The second story is a more familiar one, but one whose wonderful news is not quite so obvious. Let's set the scene. Jesus is preaching in Galilee, a portion of Roman occupied Judea that is facing an existential threat to its very existence. It is fact the same threat Judah had faced; assimilation which meant religious and cultural annihilation. The people of Galilee, who were proudly Jewish, were facing assimilation at the hands of Greco-Roman culture. There was daily pressure to abandon the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and adopt Greco-Roman customs and religion in order to survive. All around them the cultural outposts of this foreign culture were growing. In addition, the Romans and their Jewish allies were scooping up the best land and forcing the people to work as day laborers subject to the whims of the wealthy. And every attempt to right these wrongs with rebellion had been brutally put down. Into this difficult moment came Jesus declaring that the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God was at hand. In his teaching, his healing, his exorcisms the people saw the words of Isaiah coming alive, "*Truly, O people in Zion, inhabitants of Jerusalem, you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry; when he hears it, he will answer you.*" God had heard their cries. Jesus was the answer. The Kingdom was arriving. This was wonderful news.

That being the case, the question becomes for us, what do we do with these rather odd opening words from Jesus' mountain-side teaching. What do we do with these words about the people being blessed in the midst of their pain and fear; in the midst of their struggle? I say this because by telling his audience that they are blessed, when they mourn, when they are spiritually dry and especially when they are being oppressed, appears to be trivializing the predicament of the Galilean people. Some interpreters have argued that Jesus was telling the crowd that sometime in the future all would be well...but the Greek is clear that Jesus is speaking in present tense. The people are blessed now. Others interpreters, especially more recent ones, have, by translating blessed as happy, argued that Jesus was telling the crowd something akin to don't worry, be happy; again almost trivializing their struggle by saying, don't worry about how badly your life stinks at the moment, just be happy. And while that may fit our cultures desire for trivializing the pain others feel, it doesn't fit with the world transforming work that Jesus was about. So, what are we to do with these beatitudes?

What I would suggest is that we follow the lead of Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, when he translates the Greek word *markarios*, not as blessed, but as "wonderful news" as in, "because of Jesus there is wonderful news for..." Wright does this because he believes that in Jesus there is wonderful news for all people...and especially for those facing tough times. Listen again to the beatitudes with this translation....

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Because of Jesus there is wonderful news for you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

My friends, what I am trying to say is that the beatitudes are not about some pie-in-the-sky future. They are not some happy-sappy attitudes we are supposed to have when our lives are in turmoil. They are descriptions of what is happening in the radical inbreaking of God's kingdom into the world through the presence and power of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, there is wonderful news for those who hurt. There is wonderful news for those who struggle. There is wonderful news in and through Jesus Christ. Where this is leading us, is that over the next two and half months we will be looking at the wonderful news in these beatitudes as we examine them one at a time.

My challenge for you on this day then is this, to remember a moment in your life or in the life of someone you know, that was transformed by wonderful news. Then give thanks to God for that wonderful news, and allow it to give you hope during this week.