

## **VI Epiphany C 2022 (February 13)**

### **Prelude**

**Welcome to our service for February 13, 2022, the Sixth Sunday After Epiphany. I'm Pastor Curtis Aguirre. Bob Park is the musician.**

**Let's sing the hymn, "Before You, Lord, We Bow," #893 in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship books.**

**1. Before you, Lord, we bow, our God who reigns above  
and rules the world below with boundless pow'r and love.  
Our thanks we bring  
in joy and praise our hearts we raise, to you we sing!**

**2. May ev'ry mountain height, each vale and forest green,  
shine forth in wisdom's light, and its rich fruits be seen!  
May ev'ry tongue  
be tuned in praise and join to raise a grateful song.**

**3. Earth, hear your maker's voice; your great redeemer own;  
believe, obey, rejoice, and worship God alone.  
Cast down your pride,  
your sin deplore, and bow before the Crucified.**

**4. And when in pow'r he comes, oh, may then ev'ry land  
from all its rending tombs send forth a glorious band,  
a countless throng,  
with joy to sing to heav'n's high king salvation's song!**

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all... And also with you.  
Let us pray.**

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**Living God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your glory, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord.**

**Amen.**

***(Evangelical Lutheran Worship, p. 24)***

**The first reading is from Jeremiah 17:5-10**

**Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse-- who can understand it? I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.**

**Holy word, holy wisdom... Thanks be to God!**

**The Psalm for today is Psalm 1.**

**Blessed are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.**

**They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.**

**The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.**

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**Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.**

**Luke 6:17-26**

**The Gospel according to Luke, the sixth chapter...\_Glory to you, O Lord!**

**Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said:**

**"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."**

**The Gospel of the Lord... Praise to you, O Christ**

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### Sermon

Three of our readings for today—the ones I included in this service—talk about blessings and curses: of being blessed and of being cursed. So, what does it mean to be blessed and what does it mean to be cursed?

In ordinary speech, we usually say, “I’ve been blessed...” when we are talking about the good things in our lives. For example, parents might say, “we’ve been blessed with three lovely children,” or someone might say, “I’ve been SO blessed: I have a nice house, my health, friends, family...” etc.

The word “curse” we generally don’t use in the literal sense anymore. Instead, we apply the word to foul language. We call bathroom language and gutter language “cursing”. Of course, real cursing means to call upon the spiritual powers—be that God or something else—to do bad things to someone.

But we do still sometimes say that someone is cursed when things seem to go wrong for them all the time, or we might say something like, “this whole project was cursed from the beginning,” if it seems like things just never work out.

The Bible speaks of blessings and curses in particular ways, so let's look at these lessons for today to get at some of those ways of understanding blessing and curse.

The reading from Jeremiah says that those who trust in humans for strength and do not look to God for that strength are cursed. What is the context here?

First, we have to remember that Jeremiah was sent by God to warn the leadership of the Kingdom of Judah that God’s judgment was coming on the nation because they were breaking the covenant that God had made with them. This also happened to be during the time when the Babylonian Empire under Nebuchadnezzar was quickly expanding and

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conquering all the kingdoms of the region where today we have the countries of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan.

The leadership of Judah believed that they could manoeuvre their way out of trouble by making alliances with the enemies of the Babylonian Empire—especially Egypt—to try to avoid being conquered. But God said, “No! Don’t go there! It will only lead to trouble. Put all your trust in me, and I will save you.”

The mindset of the leaders of Judah was understandable. They were trying to preserve their power and independence through strategic alliances and military might. But God was more interested in preserving the integrity of the people and their faithfulness to the covenant. Had the leaders of Judah surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, the city of Jerusalem would have been spared and they would only have had to deal with the payment of tribute being imposed on them. Otherwise, they would have been left alone to run their own affairs.

Instead, the course of action pursued by the king and the nobility led to the complete destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile of all the surviving ruling class, priestly class, merchant class, and artisans.

Yes, those who trusted in human strength at that time were cursed. They were doomed to a bitter end. The underlying message here is that trusting in God means that things may not be how we like, but God will guide us to the better way, if we only listen. In this case, surrendering to the Babylonians might have seemed like weakness and defeat from a human point of view, but it would have been a blessing in disguise.

Psalm 1 says that those who avoid bad company and seek out the ways of God are blessed. What’s the context here?

Psalm 1 is a wisdom Psalm, out of the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel. The wisdom tradition was most interested in the practicalities of living a life faithful to God. Here, the psalmist and wisdom teacher is speaking at a very personal and individual level. If you, the individual, seek out positive, up-building company, and pursue spiritual things, you will do

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well, you will be happier, more grounded, more centred, more balanced. That's really all this Psalm is saying.

On the other hand—according to the second part of the Psalm—if you hang out with negative, destructive, manipulative, and dishonest people, you will get sucked in, dragged down, and find that your life is full of negativity, destruction, dishonest relationships, and deception.

It is interesting that this wisdom psalm—Psalm 1—was placed at the head of the Psalter rather than a psalm of praise or even a psalm of confession. In this way, Psalm 1 functions as an invitation to enter into the Way of God which is the Way of Wisdom. It implies that the life of prayer, study, and worship is key to a blessed journey through life.

Now to the reading from Luke: here Jesus says that those among his disciples who are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed on account of Jesus are blessed; while those who are rich, have eaten their fill, are laughing and spoken well of, are in trouble, are “cursed” (as it were) because the false prophets were also treated like this. It is an interesting twist on the idea of blessings and curses, but again: What is the context?

First, let me say that I do not think that Luke's Beatitudes are simply his different version of Matthew's Beatitudes. Rather, I think that Jesus probably delivered Beatitude-like speeches and sermons on many occasions, each time modifying and adapting the particulars to the situation, the audience, and so on. I think what we have in Matthew and Luke are two similar kinds of sermon beginnings, but they are clearly spoken in different situations, with different intentions, and probably at different stages of Jesus' ministry.

In Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount", the audience to which Jesus is speaking is ambiguous. It's hard to tell whether Jesus is talking to everyone or just to his disciples. In Luke, however, it is clear, that Jesus is speaking only to his disciples, only to the inner circle.

Jesus is saying to them—his committed followers and students: “Look, if you come from poor and troubled circumstances, following me won't be

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**so different; you'll kind of be used to it. So, if you are being given a hard time by people for following me, then you are doing the right thing. God bless you! But those of you who come from wealthy families and are used to eating your fill, and going to parties, and being highly spoken of, those days are over! Woe to you, you're gonna hate what's ahead!"**

**I think this Gospel reading in particular shows that blessing and curse are not absolute categories. Blessings and curses are particular to, and relative to circumstances. What is a blessing to one, may be a curse to another, and vice versa.**

**So, what are we doing when we bless and ask God for blessings?**

**First of all, when we ask for God's blessings, we are actually saying that we are letting go and turning the matter over to God. Now, I realize that we usually don't mean it that way when we say, "God bless you" or "God bless such-and-such". Usually, when we ask for God's blessing, we have some pretty firm ideas in our heads about what we want that blessing to produce. But really, to ask God's blessing is a prayer of release: "God, we entrust this person to you. You guide, you fulfil, you direct, and help me to be a blessing or to get out of the way."**

**Curses, of course, are frowned on in the Bible. Paul, in his letter to the Romans (12:19-21), takes the passage from Deuteronomy where God says, "Vengeance is mine, and recompense..." (32:35) and says that this means that revenge is God's domain, and anyone who takes revenge into their own hands is trespassing on God's turf. God is the only righteous judge who alone can see all that goes into anyone's actions, and therefore God alone is able to give a completely just judgment. Our judgments always arise out of a partial understanding, and often out of a lot of personal bias. And so, Paul ends this section with the words:**

**Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them  
(Romans 12:14)...**

**...echoing the words of Jesus where he says:**

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**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly. (Luke 6:27)**

**In contrast to a blessing, a curse is not a surrendering to God, but a demand on God to do your dirty work for you. Now, many of the Psalms verge on this, but they stop short. They will call on God to “defeat my enemies” and “undo the plots of my accusers” and so on. But I think the Psalms are not so much about moral guidance as they are about honest prayer, prayer from the heart without editing for social acceptability. In this way, the Psalms are an invitation to give it all to God to sort out. Vent to God, and let God take care of it.**

**At the same time, using the Psalms really makes you think about what an enemy might be. The traditional Christian way of interpreting the Psalms is to use their language about enemies to talk about our inner enemies—impulses, resentments, and so on—that can lead us to perpetrate evil if we act on them. Here we have to turn to God and ask God to destroy these inner enemies that are enemies to our faith and enemies to a life worthy of our calling. These inner enemies can also be the mental and emotional struggles that lead us into depression and despair. In the traditional Christian use of the Psalms, these inner enemies were understood to be the real enemies.**

**But the truth is that we do sometimes find ourselves in situations of conflict with others, and we can feel hard done by what others have said about us or done to us. And so, the Psalms are equally valid in this regard—it is, after all, the way they were originally written.**

**But Jesus—and Paul inspired by Jesus—moves to the next level. Yes, turn it over to God, but do so with a blessing on your lips and in your heart. This is the narrow way, the harder but better way.**

**So, if a blessing, when asked of God, is a turning over to God, with love and hope in your heart; then what does it mean when we say things like, “Go with my blessing,” or “I give my blessing”? I think when we offer our own blessing, we are simply offering our good wishes and good hopes for something, in an act that is just shy of a prayer.**



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When we ask for God's blessing, we have moved to a full prayer, and are asking, "Please God, be favourably disposed to this person or this thing or this matter. We turn it over to you, asking you to find favour."

As Jesus taught, let us always bless and ask God's blessing. Let us also be aware that blessings are diverse, and sometimes they are hidden inside harsh and difficult situations—blessings in disguise. But, no matter what the situation, let us trust in God's strength. Amen.

Let's sing the hymn, "Blessed Assurance," #638 in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship books.

1. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!  
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

### *Refrain*

This is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Saviour all the day long;  
this is my story, this is my song,  
praising my Saviour all the day long.

2. Perfect submission, perfect delight,  
visions of rapture now burst on my sight;  
angels descending bring from above  
echoes of mercy, whispers of love. (*Refrain*)

3. Perfect submission, all is at rest;  
I in my Saviour am happy and blest,  
watching and waiting, looking above,  
filled with his goodness, lost in his love. (*Refrain*)

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**Let us confess our faith using the words of the Apostle's Creed.**

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
Creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen**

### **Prayers of Intercession**

**Rejoicing in God's light made flesh in Jesus Christ, let us pray for all people according to their needs. I will end each petition with the words, "Lord, in your mercy." Please respond by saying, "Hear our prayer."**

***(Brief silence to let people gather their thoughts.)***

**Faithful God, in this time of so much uncertainty and conflicting messages, show us the way to live faithfully as your Church on earth.  
Lord, in your mercy:**

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**C: Hear our prayer.**

**Life-giving God, we give you thanks for the snow and rain that water the earth. Help us to care for the water that you have provided for us that all may drink of your abundance. Lord, in your mercy:**

**C: Hear our prayer.**

**Reconciling God, in this time of international and regional conflict, guide the leaders of the world to put away quarrelling and posturing so that they may embrace your peace. Lord, in your mercy:**

**C: Hear our prayer.**

**God of Wisdom, give to our leaders in BC and Canada, the wisdom to deal constructively with the pressures coming from all sides, so that they may be guided to work for the good of all. Lord, in your mercy:**

**C: Hear our prayer.**

**God who creates community, we pray for our congregation, and we ask your guidance and blessing as we gather today in our Annual General Meeting. Lord, in your mercy:**

**C: Hear our prayer.**

**Most Holy God, we pray for all who are ill or suffering in any way and name them before you...**

***(Long silence)***

**For all these, Lord, in your mercy:**

**C: Hear our prayer.**

**Holy Spirit, comfort and sustain us until we gather with all the saints around the throne of God. Lord, in your mercy:**

**C: Hear our prayer.**

**Radiant God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who has made his dwelling among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Saviour, who taught us to pray...**

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**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.  
Amen.**

**The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you and be  
gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favour (+) and give you  
peace. Amen.**

**Postlude**