

Matthew the gospel writer tells us that great crowds began to follow Jesus as he made his way through Galilee, preaching, teaching, and healing.

Picture, maybe, the throngs who filled the National Mall on one of our last couple of big occasions. He saw the crowds and decided that it was time for some deeper teaching about the Kingdom of God and the ways of those who would put their lot in with his.

We'll be reading much of the great instruction he offered them in the Sundays ahead.

We have long called it the Sermon on the Mount;

it is one of the touchstones of Jesus' teaching and of the spirituality, ethics, and hope of all those who would be his disciples.

I'd encourage you to be in church for these Sundays or take up Matthew 5 and following for your personal study if other weighty reasons will keep you away.

The sermon began with its most remembered phrases, the beatitudes, long-read at funerals, at times when we want to remember what holiness of life looks like according to Jesus.

This series of "blessed are" statements is familiar and utterly strange.

It calls you to a different form of life than almost any other voice that may reach your ears.

Jesus' words come to us in the Greek of the New Testament, though he spoke a different language, Aramaic.

We'll never be sure exactly what word for "blessed" he used, but the word we now have is *makarios*. Around the time of Aristotle; the word became more common and was used to describe the life of the rich.

Those with incomes they did not have to earn,

with servants to take care of their daily needs,

with the freedom of wealth, these were account *makarios* by Aeschylus and Sophocles.

Later still, it was applied to those who had encountered or earned some blessing in life.

Mothers of fine sons, husbands of beautiful women, those who exhibit wisdom;

these were called blessed by the poets of Greece.

It is strange then, that Jesus spoke of the blessedness of the poor in spirit, those hungering and thirsting for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.

These are all very hard things to be; most are imposed rather than sought.

By no means are these the states of being that any previous writer or speaker of Greek would call blessed.

To be without care, to be transcendent, to be beyond the labor and toil of this world, or to have a reduced share in it by some sort of divine providence, this was to be blessed.

Jesus said it quite differently, that to be blessed was to be under the heel of unjust powers, working for and expecting the kingdom, even at great personal cost.

If there were any in the great crowd looking for the quick fix, for spiritual candy, for magic, he disappointed them right at the start.

But those whom came in suffering and shame heard words of hard-won hope, something they could believe in, in the long run.

They heard that they were blessed, that God was on their side.

When I was younger, I used to visit Washington pretty often.

When I was in seminary in Connecticut, it was a nice place to stop and spend the night with a friend.

We would enjoy the big city, explore the museums and monuments.

I did not go then, for many years, and went twice last year, with one of my sons for a baptism and with Elizabeth for a wedding.

After some years of life in our smaller community, I saw the city with fresh eyes, saw its intended imperial grandeur.

Wide avenues, vast buildings, marble monuments; spaces and structures that make you feel small and might impress you.

It is beautiful, if it is yours, and impressive, if you are inclined to be impressed by such things.

Except for a few spaces and monuments, it will not leave you thinking on hunger, thirst, or poverty of spirit.

Even our beautiful National Cathedral, on the city's heights, stands in stark contrast to the style of the Galilean rabbi in whose Spirit we have gathered here today.

One of the wonders of those visits was using the ride-sharing service Uber to get around the city.

The app on your phone connects to the app on the drivers phone.

They quickly find you when you request and they are guided exactly where you want to go, and for little money.

Long walks to the stations and waiting for the Metro to come are no longer necessary.

Remarkable to me were the stories of our drivers.

A maintenance man from a Maryland suburb, drove us to church at the end of night spent driving, to make ends meet.

He told me of his aching desire that his children have an easier life.

A single mother who worked in a convenience store outside the beltway in Virginia, who drove to keep her bills paid as well.

An immigrant from Turkey, studying in community college, who told me of his great joy at calling the city and this country his new home.

The humble, the hungry, the poor in spirit, at the wheel, we sped or crept past the monuments and vistas of a city that looks like the capital of the world, on our way to the elegant parties that marked those two occasions.

The ways of the Kingdom and the ways of the world are always like that, found together, parallel, intertwined.

They are that way in my life, in our church, in our society.

Strength and pride and beauty and power allure; we cannot imagine abandoning them.

We struggle to get and hang on to some measure of them.

Though a voice within continually reminds that mercy, humility, and the needs of others should guide us.

Perhaps the message of the great instruction, this Sermon on the Mount, is one that a great crowd will always be deaf to hear.

We who gather as disciples, must, however.

And if obliged to choose, the way of the poor in spirit, the way of those hungering and thirsting for righteousness,

The way of the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted is the way that Jesus invites.