

Sermon for Sunday, January 29, 2017  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It all began  
when Jesus was baptized.  
Standing  
in the river Jordan  
water gushing around him,  
the voice from heaven  
“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

And with those words of blessing  
he found himself out in the wilderness  
the devil seducing him  
to abandon his fast,  
to test God’s willingness to save him,  
to trade faithfulness to God  
for international power.  
Resisting, always resisting,  
and after forty long days  
hungry and tempted  
he found himself blessed again,  
and headed out  
to begin the work  
that God’s blessing  
demanded of him.  
And began to preach  
the kingdom of God.

So the gospel of Matthew tells us  
that Jesus ministry begins.  
A lone figure  
speaking  
God’s grace.

And then they began to join him,  
first Simon and Andrew, then James and John,  
and together they travelled  
as he taught and preached and healed.

And others joined them,  
and the crowds began to build,  
people traveling long distances to see him.

And so one morning  
he got up early, quietly,  
and with the few  
who were staying with him  
went up a nearby mountain,  
and he began to preach  
what we know today  
as the Sermon on the Mount.

And by the end of the sermon  
the crowds who had been following him everywhere else  
had found him there too.  
But here  
at the beginning  
it was just those closest to him,  
those who had decided to follow him  
not just for a day  
but indefinitely.

And he gathered them around him  
and began to speak:  
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom  
of heaven.  
“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil  
against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in  
heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Often we kind of pass over the beatitudes, loving them for their promises for tough times,  
but being thankful that we don’t fit the categories in good times.

But these are the first things that Jesus chose to say to his first  
closest  
followers.

And it's clear  
by the way he changes from talking about "those people"  
to talking about "you"  
in the final verse  
that he is talking directly to them.  
And I think the key  
is in the first word.  
"Blessed."

When we think of blessed, we tend to think  
that good things have happened to us.  
We've had a baby or grand baby,  
we've got a new job,  
we've done well financially.

But Jesus came from a tradition  
where being blessed  
wasn't so much about what you receive  
but about what you do.  
In the biblical tradition, to receive God's blessing was to be given the charge and  
responsibility of being a blessing to others.  
It was a kind of commissioning.

Remember the story of Abraham?  
He was originally from Ur,  
a city south of present day Baghdad in Iraq,  
but had moved with his father  
to Haran in present day Turkey.  
And then, when his father died,  
God said to him  
'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will  
show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name  
great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who  
curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

Being blessed by God  
was not simply

a sign of God's favor.  
Being blessed  
was a commission  
to go and share God's blessing  
with others.

Jesus himself  
had been blessed by God  
at his baptism  
and that had started him  
on his public ministry  
among his people.

Now he begins, in the first substantial bit of teaching  
recorded in the gospel of Matthew  
he begins  
by talking about blessing.

And blessing  
is not about being successful.  
Blessing  
is about going and sharing  
God's blessing with others.

And this is where being a Christian gets hard.  
We are in a time  
where there's not a lot of blessing going on.  
Fear is on the ascendancy.  
There is a lot of talk about making sure we're okay.  
And a lot of that is happening  
on the public stage.

Sometimes people think  
that the separation of church and state  
means that we as Christians  
cannot have opinions about what happens on the public stage,  
that we cannot use our beliefs as the basis to critique  
things that are happening in the public life of our country.

But Jesus did. Jesus spoke out

about things that he believed were contrary  
to God's word,  
contrary  
to God's design for us.

The great theologian Karl Barth argued  
that as Christians  
we should have  
the bible in one hand  
and the newspaper in the other.  
And we should use the bible  
to interpret, to critique  
what we find in the newspaper.  
In other words,  
whatever happens in our world  
should be evaluated  
on the basis of Scripture.

Today  
the front page of Newsday  
the front page of the New York Post  
and the front page of the New York Times  
all have the same story.  
The executive order banning all people born in the seven countries  
of Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen  
from entering the country for the next 90 days.  
The ban includes those who hold green cards.  
Refugees are banned from entering for 120 days.  
People from Syria are banned indefinitely.

What does that mean in practice?  
It means that people who live legally here in the United States  
but were born in one of those countries  
and have travelled overseas  
for whatever reason - whether to visit relatives,  
or for business  
or for a vacation -  
cannot return.  
It means that people who served our country  
by working with the military as translators

whose lives are in danger because of that work  
 and who have been granted refugee visas  
 cannot enter our country.  
 It means that children like little Alan Kurdi,  
 that Syrian toddler  
 whose body was washed up on the beach in Turkey  
 and whose story shocked us  
 cannot enter our country.

Yes, it is reasonable to want to protect ourselves against those who would do us harm.  
 But there is no guarantee that this action will make any difference.  
 None of the 9/11 attackers  
 came from the seven countries listed.  
 They would still be free to enter.

In Leviticus, chapter 19, it says,  
 “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:  
 Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy,  
 for I the Lord your God am holy....When an alien resides with you in your land, you  
 shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen  
 among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt:  
 I am the Lord your God.”

This was spoken to a group of people  
 who had lost their homeland.  
 They had been exiled in Egypt, where they had been persecuted.  
 And now they were on their way home,  
 to establish their new nation.  
 It wouldn't be easy.  
 They would face opposition  
 from those who had settled there  
 while they had been away.  
 They would have to fight for their ancestral lands,  
 and there would always be enemies on their borders  
 seeking to expand their territory.  
 But once they were settled,  
 once they were settled  
 they were to welcome people who came to live among them,  
 welcome them even though  
 there was every chance

that those people  
would come from one of the nations  
that threatened them.

The decision to ban people from those seven countries  
to enter our country  
is not consistent with the bible.  
It is not consistent with the Old Testament's call  
to welcome aliens,  
and it is not consistent with Jesus' call  
for us to be blessings.

We are not blessing anyone by this action  
except perhaps this  
who are look for more evidence  
to bolster their anger against the United States.

It is a broad brush action  
that hurts many  
who have done no harm.

It hurts the Iraqi American Christian couple  
who have been living here in the US and are active members of a church,  
and can't get home after a family visit.

It hurts the Syrian refugee family with six children  
who were due to arrive this week  
their church sponsors devastated  
after all their hard work to prepare for them.

It is rooted in fear, not in love.

Today we need to decide  
if we are to follow Christ's teachings  
to be a blessing to others.  
If we choose to follow him  
we need to act as peacemakers,  
with mercy,  
with love,  
regardless of the cost.

And we will see  
the kingdom  
of heaven.