

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 13, 2022 (Epiphany 6C)

The Sermon on the Mount gets all the publicity. It's basically Jesus' version of Martin Luther King's I Have a Dream speech. Nobody wants to talk about King's *other* speeches, and nobody wants to talk about Jesus' *other* sermons. But this morning we hear what's known as the Sermon on the Plain.

There are certainly parallels between the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, beginning with the traditional form of the beatitude, which they both employ: "Blessed are the fill-in-the-blank." Both sermons also include a number of other sayings beyond the Beatitudes, but Luke's version just doesn't get the same recognition as Matthew's. Partly because the Sermon on the Mount is much longer, and maybe also because mountains seem so lofty and plains so...plain.

It does make sense that there would be similarities between the two sermons, however. Obviously Jesus preached a lot and, if he's like all the preachers I've ever known, he had some themes that he went back to again and again. Themes that were so important that he said them in different ways to different audiences at different times.

Or think about a politician who gives a stump speech. The themes are the same when he visits different towns, but the delivery varies based on the circumstances and context of the audience. There may be certain messages to highlight with one crowd over another; the candidate's schedule may allow for an extra five minutes in one place and slightly less in the next one. But thematically, people running for office try to stay "on message."

So, while it's no surprise that these two sermons were similar, it's also important to pay attention to the differences. The biggest difference, of course, is the topography. The Sermon on the Mount takes place on, well, a mountain. Jesus evokes Moses handing down the 10 Commandments from atop Mount Sinai, as he offers the traditional and well-known Beatitudes. "Blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the meek, and so forth." Jesus' words are written on the human heart rather than on stone tablets, but they are equally central to our faith.

The Sermon on the Plain or, literally, the sermon on the "level place," was delivered after Jesus spent the night praying on a mountain with the 12 apostles. We hear that he came down from the mountain and preached to a great crowd. And the location matters here. Jesus came down to meet the people where they were, both literally and metaphorically.

What's interesting is that the phrase "level place" in Scripture often refers to places of suffering and hunger and mourning. It is the level place where you find corpses or people making idols or those in distress. And we're reminded that Jesus isn't above death and sin and destruction. He wades right into these level places, bringing healing and hope and forgiveness. To me, this is what makes the Sermon on the Plain so powerful, even before any words are even uttered. The fact that Jesus not only doesn't avoid the level places, he actively seeks them out as places to offer words of comfort and inspiration.

We all find ourselves in those level places at various times in our lives. Whether it's mourning the loss of a loved one, asking forgiveness for something we have done or left undone, feeling hopeless and defeated by the circumstances of our lives, being isolated and disconnected from our faith. You may find yourself in a level place at this very moment, at least in some aspect of your life. And these level places can be painful, lonely places.

The good news is that Jesus doesn't abandon us to the level places of our lives. Just as he comes down the mountain to address the crowd that has gathered on the plain, Jesus comes to *us* in the level places. He beckons us towards him and then stands with us; reaching out to us, inviting us, loving us into new ways of being.

Of course, focusing exclusively on the topography of these two versions of the Beatitudes distracts us from focusing on the words themselves. And in our context, perhaps that's an easier path. Because those four "woe to you's" that follow the four "blessed are you's" seem to be aimed squarely at us. With laser-like focus, Jesus calls out the well-fed and the wealthy, the respected and the rewarded. And, while we may not be there all the time, I think most of us identify less with the ones Jesus calls blessed — the poor, the hungry, the excluded, the reviled — and more with the ones to whom he issues warnings. Which is what those "woes" really are, caution signs for the contented.

The great leveling of the human condition may well be that we all encounter those level places. Rich or poor, hungry or well-fed, respected or reviled, at times we all find ourselves in those hard places. Which isn't to undermine or spiritualize the call to action embedded in Jesus' words. The Sermon on the Plain remains a wake-up call to restore the balance of inequity that is a hallmark of our very existence. It is a call to generosity, a call to love our neighbors, especially those among us who are hurting. It is a call to justice. But it is also a reminder that all of us have the potential to hurt emotionally and spiritually, if not materially. No one is exempt from the level places.

You know, just as we need the differing perspectives of the four gospels to offer us a complete picture of Jesus, we need both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain to offer us a complete visual of his message. We need the transcendence and mystery of the God who comes to us from on high. And we need the immanence and intimacy of the God who meets us in our brokenness.

There is room in our faith lives for both transcendence and immanence; for awe-inspiring mystery and intimate presence; for the God who speaks to us from the heavens, and the God who speaks to us through everyday interactions. We encounter God on the mountaintop and we encounter God on the plain.

To focus exclusively on the mountaintop is to miss the Jesus standing right in front of us. To focus exclusively on the plain is to miss the Jesus who comes to us in glorious majesty. But when taken together we're drawn into the fullness of God. We encounter the divine presence in both God's love for all of humankind, and in God's love for each one of us. We need the mountaintop; we need the plain.

The Sermon on the Mount will always get more press and more love than the Sermon on the Plain. It's rightfully seen as one of Jesus' greatest hits. But don't neglect the plain. Remember those level places, and know that whenever you find yourself deeply embedded inside of one, Jesus is standing right beside you.