

Covenant Word

Landscapes of the Spirit

Micah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12

*A Message by
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Pastor
Sunday
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He was excited about Christmas. I could see Dannelly from the kitchen as he visited the presents under the tree. There was one that he kept bringing to the forefront, adjusting its ribbon and making sure that the tape was secure. "Who's present is that?" I finally asked. "It's yours!" came his swift reply. "It is my gift to you, and Mom, you are going to love it."

I could hardly wait for Christmas to dawn! He presented the package to me as if it were fragile and precious. With the wrappings taken away, I realized that it was a coffee table book with color photographs of Cuba. Dan explained: "The photographer was a former professor at the University of Alabama. He took some students to Cuba and fell in love with it, so he lived there for three years. This book is the result of his work. Still a resident of Tuscaloosa, I went to his house to pick up your book. He met me on the front porch in his bathrobe, and he was smoking a cigar! We talked a long time. I told him about our mission trips to Cuba, and he told me that when he takes pictures in Cuba, something happens to him. There is a spiritual exchange when he works behind the camera lens on the landscapes of Cuba."

What does your spiritual landscape look like? Is it the lush, verdant fields of Cuba or the old clap board whitewashed church standing on cement blocks in sandy soil surrounded by scrub pines? Does the geography of cloud-haunted mountains or the rolling surf of the sea speak to your soul? In what geographical location are you certain of the presence of God and the existence of God's kingdom? What does your spiritual landscape look like?

In Matthew's gospel, we are given one landscape after another. See how many you can identify in my next sentences. We read that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. He went into the wilderness to wrestle with the devil, and when he returned, he

found out that His cousin, John the Baptist was in jail. So Jesus leaves Nazareth, home, and goes to the area around Galilee to preach a sermon very much like John's: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." He calls the first disciples with the word "follow," and so Peter and Andrew, James and John leave their nets, their boats, and their families to do just that. We don't know if they wrestle with spiritual concerns or if they are active in groups of resistance against the Romans, who are in political power. From all practical observances, they are young and life is pressing in on their hearts like steam in an unpoppered kettle of popcorn. (Clarence Jordan, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 9) And so they drop their nets to follow Jesus as He preaches and heals. The scripture says that Jesus' fame spread throughout all of Syria, Galilee, the Decapolis and Jerusalem. By Chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is ready to preach His own sermon and teach the disciples as the gathered crowds overhear the lesson.

Now in that one catch-us-up-in-the-story paragraph, I have mentioned, at least, 10 landscapes. Have you engaged your imagination to "see" the geography behind the story? The landscape, I believe, tells us something about what is going on in the spirit of the story as well as the spirit of the person. Geography is easily overlooked in scripture, but its context provides information that is valuable in

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understanding the story and what is happening spiritually with the character. So it makes sense that Jesus wrestles with the devil in a landscape of wilderness, a god-forsaken, barren place. It makes sense that Jesus would leave the rocky terrain, one well, cave dwellers in the town of Nazareth in order to experience the rolling green hills of Galilee where water is abundant and clear. Jesus needs a fertile place in order to grow into His ministry. And those early disciples? To come from a landscape of fishing creates images for us of how they possess expertise in throwing a net in such a way as to capture our hearts with the good news of a coming Kingdom.

Perhaps it is just convenient for Jesus to teach the disciples on one of the hills besides the Sea of Galilee. I think, however, that there is something more to the landscape choice. You see, I have stood in that very location. It is lush and lovely. You sit on the hill and look down at the lake and the breeze blows ever so slightly. It is a perfect teaching spot:



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Covenant*

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... Jesus says if we never weep, how will we learn what it is to be comforted? If we never mourn, how will we recognize the blessing of joy? How can we receive a blessing when we are already filled with the gluttony of right answers? It is the longing for peace, and enduring the agony of finding ourselves empty, that draws us closer to the One who has all we need.

The world says, avoid anything that brings pain or, God forbid, might make us weep; but Jesus says if we never weep, how will we learn what it is to be comforted? If we never mourn, how will we recognize the blessing of joy? How can we receive a blessing when we are already filled with the gluttony of right answers? It is the longing for peace, and enduring the agony of finding ourselves empty, that draws us closer to the One who has all we need. Life is difficult. Our landscapes threaten constant danger. And yet, knowing that we are blessed no matter what, gives us just enough vision of the Kingdom of God to remain hopeful. (McClurg)

Jesus down below, looking up at the disciples and the crowds beyond that. The acoustics are good, and the surroundings support the beautiful poetry that Jesus begins to speak. And when the listeners summon this experience from their memory, the words will always be found in a landscape of beauty.

What does your spiritual landscape look like?

Into the geography of Galilee, Jesus gives His disciples His very first words of instruction. The lesson is not a check list of conditions to be achieved in order to be blessed. They are not virtues to attain. They are acts of blessing in which the very doing blesses the doer and the receiver. They are performative not instructive. (Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*, p. 184)

Scholars debate the translation of "blessed." It is the Greek word "makarios" and can be used to refer to abounding joy...so much joy that it cannot be contained. Another says it means *congratulations*, another translates it as *happy* and still another says it is akin to the French word *debonair* or lighthearted. For our purposes today, we might lean on Father Gregory Boyle's definition when he says:

Greater precision in translation would say: 'You are in the right place if you are single-hearted or work for peace. You are in the right place if you are struggling for justice.' The Beatitudes are not spirituality after all. They are geography. They <give us a landscape in which> to stand.

Frederick Buechner (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 31) writes:

If you want to know who you really are (as opposed to who you think you are), look where your feet are taking you.

It is as if the Beatitudes say:

+You are standing in the right place if within that landscape you can be poor in spirit;

+You are standing in the right place if your landscape provides comfort for your mourning.

+You are standing in the right place if when attempting to be meek, you are surrounded by others who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness.

+You are standing in the right place if when enacting mercy, you discover purity of heart.

+You are standing in the right place if when making peace, persecution follows.

A friend of mine says this gospel passage is simply how Jesus defines sanity or how to keep our heads on straight when the world makes our minds spin. The culture that holds sway over us says we should want to "make it big." We should want to be and do "what really matters," which is to accumulate more power, more influence, more wealth. Jesus, on the other hand, says we will have more fun being poor, with no power in our pockets at all. (Kayla McClurg, "The Blessing Path," admin@inwardoutward.org)

This promising language is being preached all over the world today. It brings the good news to Shalom Baptist Church in Boca de Mariel that things will not always be as they are now. It is a promise to the children in Terra Nova Academy in Uganda and to the teen agers in SouthTown, to the Hispanics in Shelby County and to the poverty ridden in Perry County that their current landscape will not remain as it is forever. No, it will change. It will grow into the Kingdom of God!

I have told you stories about my brother before...how he was a child of the 60's: angry over Viet Nam, suspicious of authority, frustrated in traditional school and possessing a free spirit that was not acceptable for a Baptist preacher's son. Upon returning to Birmingham after graduating from The American Academy of Art in Chicago, he found that things had not changed much in Birmingham. The least of which was a deacon who still met him at the doors of Southside Baptist Church every Sunday in order to tell him to get his hair cut and clean up his life.

So on the night after Christmas, I remember Jim walking into our den where I was watching the news with our Dad. "I've packed my car and I'm leaving tomorrow for Denver," he announced. There was no response from our father. I imagine grief, and quite possibly relief, kept him completely immobile. And so Jim, early the next morning, changed his landscape.

Denver was good for Jim. There were wide open spaces in Denver for him to breathe and opportunities to use his talent. He fell in love, and I suspect that this wonderful woman who became my sister in law created a landscape for Jim that felt safe and warm, full of stability and blessing. I credit her for being able to help Jim hear and believe that he really is a beloved child of God.

When Dad got sick, we were amazed at how quickly Jim got to Evergreen. He used his family care leave and patiently, lovingly, tenderly cared for Dad. But even greater was our surprise when

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Jim announced that he would like purchase the old family home in order to retire and grow old there. And to our amazement, not only Jim came, but so did his daughters who are raising Jim's grandchildren right there in Evergreen.

Jim attends the Belleville Baptist Church on the Sunday that the itinerant preacher is in town. Worship is only once a month and I suspect that this is just right for Jim. Jim sits on the pew that our great great grandfather made with his very own hands. He sits there with his wife, two grown daughters, their spouses and Jim's grandchildren. Before he leaves, he walks out to the cemetery to visit the graves of our mother and father and all the other ancestors, and he realizes that he is blessed. Blessed! ...to have a landscape that is full of redemption and grace...and so full of blessing.

One of the greatest joys I have as your pastor is to watch and encourage you when you exchange one landscape for another so that you can hear and enact the Beatitudes. To see you get your bearings and stand with confidence in a new terrain is a blessing. For every time you claim geography in which healing occurs and love abounds, our troubled world receives grace for healing one landscape at a time. So this morning, I invite you, in this landscape of loving acceptance to stand, if you are able, and receive a blessing.

(Some taken from Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Blessed are They," Accidental Saints) Blessed are they who are not sure about personal faith and yet can still be surprised by the presence of Christ.

Blessed are they who have nothing to offer but their questions.

Blessed are they who bury loved ones, and those difficult-to-love ones, with dignity.

Blessed are they who love enough to know what genuine loss feels like.

Blessed are they who can't fall apart, because they have to keep it together for everyone else.

Blessed are they who hear that they are forgiven and believe it.

Blessed are the mothers who have miscarried. Blessed are the mothers who give their babies up for adoption, and blessed are the mothers who love children they did not give birth to.

Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet," whatever "it" may be.

Blessed are those who no one else notices: the teens who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables; the invisible laundry workers at the hospital; the sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers.

Blessed are the closeted.

Blessed are the unemployed, the unimpressive, the under-represented.

Blessed are the teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms.

Blessed are those without documentation.

Blessed are the ones without lobbyists.

Blessed are the foster children and the trophy children and the special ed children and every other child who just wants to feel safe and loved.

Blessed are the burned-out social workers, the overworked teachers and the pro bono case takers.

Blessed are those who step between the bullies and the weak.

Blessed is everyone who has ever forgiven me when I am sure I didn't deserve it.

Blessed are the merciful, for they totally get it.

Blessed are you Baptist Church of the Covenant, who do not grow weary in well-doing, for yours, for ours, is the Kingdom of God right here and right now. Into this landscape, may we live, amen.

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