

The Upside-Down Kingdom: Blessed are the Meek

Psalm 37:1-11

Luke 1:46-55

We're reflecting on the beatitudes this fall—these blessings, where Jesus invites us to see as God sees, in his upside-down Kingdom. And with each beatitude, we are looking at a couple of passages or stories in the Bible that illustrate it. This morning, as we reflect on the beatitude "*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,*" we heard the Psalm that Jesus quotes from, practically word for word (37), and we are also going to hear Mary's song, or the Magnificat as it's called, from Luke's gospel. It's a passage that we typically read during the season of Advent, but it's a wonderful illustration of a *person* who is meek (Mary), and of a *song* that proclaims how God *notices* the meek and lowly, and lifts them up. This song is one of the best examples of the upside-down kingdom that we're talking about during this series, of God seeing and noticing persons that would typically be ignored, or who would just go unnoticed. In fact, in Mary's song she says, "God sees me."

A reminder of the context (a little Advent in October): Mary has had a visit from the angel Gabriel, telling her that God has chosen her to bear the Messiah through an unlikely conception, by the Holy Spirit. Mary then makes haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth to share the news, having learned from the angel Gabriel that

Elizabeth has also had an unlikely conception, and when Mary arrives Elizabeth exclaims that Mary is blessed. In a way, she is giving the beatitude “blessed are the meek” before Jesus ever said it! And Mary’s reply is this song of praise:

Luke 1:46-55

46 And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.’

This is the word of the Lord

I wonder what comes to your mind when you hear the word “meek”? Or, *who* comes to mind when you hear the word “meek”? Suppose you are hearing

this for the first time—blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. What associations do you have with meekness?

The word that is commonly translated as “meek” from the Hebrew in the Old Testament and the Greek in the New Testament is difficult to translate into English. In some ways “meek” is an unfortunate translation into the English. Or, we have a vocabulary problem with how that word is commonly used in English, because for many people meekness is often associated with weakness, or being mousy, or withdrawn; having a diminutive personality. The problem with *that* understanding of meekness, Biblically, is that, in addition to Mary, we have two other towering figures in the Bible who were described as meek. And I’m quite sure we would not say that they were mousy, withdrawn, weak, or diminutive.

First, Moses. In the book of Numbers (12:3) it says this: “Now the man Moses was very meek; more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.” Really? If we define meekness as being mousy or weak or diminutive, this certainly *does not* ring true in Moses’ case. Moses was anything but that. He had a fiery temper. If Moses were alive now he might be sent for anger management. One of the first things we learn about him is that as a younger man he murdered someone (he saw an Egyptian beating a fellow Hebrew slave, and Moses killed the Egyptian; then buried him in the sand to literally cover up the crime); and decades

later, during the wilderness wanderings when the Israelites complained, Moses lost his temper with them on a couple occasions and let them have it—and he let God have it too. And aside from his occasional expressions of anger, Moses led an entire nation out of slavery, and through the desert for 40 years. Moses meek? Not if we define it the way we often think of it.

The second towering figure in the Bible described as meek is... Jesus! He is not just a towering figure; he's God in the flesh! "Jesus meek and mild," right? Does that ring true, according to the common understanding of meekness? This Jesus who gave his disciples the business when his teaching wasn't quite sinking in with them? Who called Peter "Satan" at one point? This Jesus, who, shortly after entering Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week went straight to the temple and began rearranging the furniture by overturning the tables of the corrupt money changers who were taking up space that was reserved for non-Jewish worshippers? Who called the Pharisees "whitewashed tombs" and "venomous snakes"? Is this meekness? Again, not if we define meekness as being diminutive or weak.

In one of his wonderful affirmations/invitations Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am *meek* and humble of heart." I'm

pretty sure Jesus is not telling us to come to him for rest because he is weak. Just the opposite, actually.

Because one way to find out what a word really means is to go to the places where the word is used and explore how it is used in those contexts. And so, given the contexts where it is used with these two examples (Moses and Jesus), **one way** we can define meekness is that it is *quiet inner strength*; a chosen posture of setting aside power to become gentle, and humble. “Down to earth” as EP translates it in the message. Literally, “close to the land.” So, we could define meekness as *power restrained; a chosen gentleness*. I can look at Moses’ life and see his meekness in that sense. Because even though he did lose his temper occasionally, most of the time he was the quiet and steady leader—a reluctant leader, actually—faithful, and encouraging the people to overcome fear, and go forward. The one who consistently interceded on behalf of the people. The one who went to quiet places to pray and talk to God, daily, to receive inner strength. Losing your temper only two or three times during 40 years of wilderness wanderings is actually a pretty good record as far as I’m concerned! Better than most of us would do in his situation.

And, of course, we can see Jesus as meek in this way as well; as a person of restrained power; chosen gentleness. Paul puts it brilliantly in Philippians 2—

“Even though he was in the form of God, he didn’t consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but humbled himself.” In other words, he set aside power. Like we talked about last week, Jesus emptied himself, so that God could fill him with true inner strength.

We see this at the *beginning* of Holy Week, as Jesus rides into Jerusalem during the triumphal entry. Gospel writer Matthew narrates it by saying, “See, he comes to you *meek* and riding on a donkey” (“close to earth”!). Not on a war horse, to great fanfare, with a large intimidating entourage, but humbly, at the beginning of Holy Week. And especially at the *end* of Holy Week, we see his *quiet strength*, as his words and actions become fewer and fewer, and he surrenders himself to God’s will completely, in love.

When meekness is defined as a chosen gentleness and a quiet strength and humility, it makes sense of what the apostle Paul says to us in Colossians 3: “As God’s beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, *meekness*, and patience.” What he is saying to us is, choose gentleness. Though you *could* exercise power—whether social power, or verbal power, choose to be judicious in the exercise of your power for the sake of others.

Make sense?

This is one way to look at meekness: power restrained, for the sake of others. A chosen gentleness. People who do that are blessed by God.

The **other way** to look at meekness, or define meekness, is to see meekness as a way to describe those who *are truly in a position of powerlessness*. Those who are truly of low position in life—whether it's because they have limited material resources, or because they are socially powerless, or whether they are simply and sincerely humble and quiet people in their personality, who would never want to force themselves on anyone.

We wouldn't say these people are mousy, but, rather, perhaps, that they "would never hurt a mouse." Sincerely gentle persons.

This is Mary, who is quiet and (in her own words) lowly. Who is powerless by virtue of her place in society as a younger woman, but also because of her poverty. Yet God saw her, and saw in her strength and faith.

This kind of meekness/gentleness made me think of Rosa Parks. A quiet, shy and introverted, genuinely humble and gentle woman who never wanted to make a fuss in her life, yet who exercised an enormous inner strength to stay seated on the front of that bus in Montgomery because, in her words, "I'm tired." She had had enough, yet quietly, but with great inner strength, stood her ground (or, remained in her seat).

The bus driver, who I understand actually like Rosa Parks and didn't want to see her get into trouble, tried to encourage her to move to the back or get off of the bus. But she sat there quietly. And he finally said to her, "I can have you arrested." And she said, "You may do that." Now there is a person of quiet strength!

I think this is the kind of person that David is talking about in Psalm 37—where he is encouraging the meek to not fret over the ways of the powerful who exercise their power over others for personal gain, who possess the land (or seem to be possessing the land). David is reassuring them that God will eventually turn things around, and the *meek* will inherit the land. They will receive what is rightly theirs. So, he says, don't fret. Trust God, do good, and God will eventually make everything right.

Same with Mary's song. She herself is one of those of low estate, as she points out. She is powerless, with little resources; unassuming. Mary is one of the meek, and she sings of the great reversal that David talks about (the upside-down kingdom) when God will bring down the lofty, and raise up the lowly. Mary's song is perhaps a precursor to Jesus' beatitude: blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth/land. And perhaps the emphasis needs to be on the

word “they.” *They* will inherit the earth. Those who humbly live in harmony with others and with the land; not those who *exploit* the land and its people.

That’s the upside-down nature of this beatitude. The world would say, “Blessed are the powerful, for they shall acquire and control the world’s resources.” But Jesus says it’s the *meek* who are blessed, and *they* inherit the earth/land.

There is a clear juxtaposition in this beatitude, of those who *exploit* the earth & land for personal gain with those who naturally and quietly live in harmony with the land, which will be returned to them.

In the time of Jesus it was the Romans who were powerful and were grabbing land that rightfully belonged to others, and then charged exorbitant taxes from anyone living on the land *that they had taken*; or, they demanded large portions of their harvest if they were farmers. It would be like someone in a position of power and authority taking ownership of your car from you without your permission, then loaning it back to you and charging you \$100 a day to use it, under penalty of being sent to prison, or worse.

The juxtaposition is between the powerful who *take and exploit* the land, with those who will *inherit* the land: the meek, the gentle, the powerless, and those who *choose* to set aside power for the sake of others.

Jesus' promised blessing is that the land/earth will become their inheritance. Not by might or by force, but by God's reversal of fortunes, which Mary and David both sing about—the upside-down kingdom.

While I was on vacation I took the light rail from our house downtown and wandered around for a while, and while visiting Pike Place Market, I stopped to listen to a Native American man in the park adjacent to the market playing his guitar and singing classic Americana songs. One of the songs he sang was, "This land is your land, this land is my land..." Which was playful and brilliant, because it invited passers-by to think: whose land is it, really? He was smiling and had a sign next to him that said, "Please respect the land." He wasn't asking for donations for himself or anything. He was affirming that the land and its resources are to be enjoyed and shared and lived in harmony with, together.

My native friends in Alaska would take this one step further and say, not only is this your land and my land, they would say, "This land is *Creator's* land." God's land. Therefore, it is to be respected and honored as a gift, gratefully, with all of life. Our indigenous/native friends speak about living in a reciprocal relationship with earth, with the land. We don't take more than we need, and we always give something back to the land/earth. That's part of the humility and

simplicity of what indigenous peoples around the world call “The harmony way.”

Living simply, humbly, and reciprocally, with the earth.

One couple Heidi and I knew from our years in Alaska, who I had the joy of spending some time fishing with in Bristol Bay, were Inupiat and Aleut. They were members of our church in Anchorage. Mel ran the driftnet boat operation out in the bay, and his wife Kathy and their daughters had set-net sights on the beach in Naknek. I helped on the boat during the height of the summer salmon run for a week, and just being around Mel was a gift. He was a large strapping native man who looked like he could wrestle a bear, but he was the kindest, gentlest man I ever met. Didn't have a mean bone in his body. One of the many things I remember from being on the boat with him was that sometimes when he came out from the cabin helm, he would stand on the back deck of the boat and look out over the water, and with a big smile on his face he would quote the first two verses of Psalm 24: *“The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it; for God has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.”* He had a deep connection to the earth (land and sea), as indigenous people do, and he understood his part in the world that God had made, as one person who is both beloved of God *and* responsible for the well-being of the earth

and all its inhabitants. Because it is all gift. When I think of this beatitude, I think of Mel.

And, I think of Mary, who likewise understood her part in God's world and what God had asked her to do. And she bravely sang her song, and lived out her calling as someone who was noticed by God, and blessed.

And we're going to sing her song with her, a little Christmas in October (Advent in October, actually) as we sing the Cantic of the Turning.