



Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
1 February 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

My mother-in-law stayed with us over Christmas and into the early days of this Epiphany season. As she prepared to fly home, she mentioned that maybe she would like to upgrade her cellphone. I was thrilled. In fact – the entire family was thrilled. Three daughters. Three sons-in-law. Nine grandchildren. Each of us had helped her navigate her cell phone at one time or another. Her cell phone was ancient. The battery barely held its charge. It was big. It was heavy. It was time. So, when she mentioned a possible upgrade, my only answer was, “Nora – of course – I would love to help you upgrade your cell phone.” When we visited the AT&T store, even the customer service agent was thrilled. He might have been seventeen. My mother-in-law’s cell phone may have been older. Does anyone happen to know the version of the latest iPhone? Not 12. Not 14. Not 15 or even 16 but 17 is the latest version. My mother-in-law was still happily in love with her iPhone 6. But then again, she raised children in a time when the phrase, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” gained popularity. I reminded her of another well-known phrase, “all good things come to an end.” Or as the author of Ecclesiastes would say, “to everything a season.” On the day we walked into AT&T, my mother-in-law flew right by some ten iPhone iterations and 11 years of seasons to the promised land of powerful, yet nimble – awe-dropping iPhone 17. It was time!

After Jesus leaves his testing in the wilderness. After Jesus begins to call the disciples to follow – we find ourselves here at the Mount of Beatitudes, on the Korazim plateau, nestled on the edge of the sea of Galilee, between Capernaum and Geneseret. It is here, where Jesus chooses to reveal himself, not in miraculous sign, but in a sermon so captivating, that it is still remembered to this day by both believer and non-believer alike. Today– Jesus preaches. It is time. To everything a season. For Jesus, and all of us, a season of new beginnings. No offense to Matthew but had someone recorded this sermon with their new iPhone 17– the world might be a very different. His sermon on the mount is one of the most cherished, studied, remembered, and quoted sermons ever to be preached. But for all the attention given it, little attention has been given to those who first heard it. Right before Jesus starts preaching today – Matthew tells us this...Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis – the region of the 10 cities, Jerusalem, Judea, and the across the Jordan followed Jesus. And here is where author Ken Gire picks up the story for us.

The crowds were comprised largely of outsiders. From Galilee came a lot of racially mixed, unorthodox Jews. From the Decapolis and settlements east of the Jordan River came a lot of Gentiles. Many in the crowds were those whom Jesus had healed. The diseased and infirm. The demonized and the insane. The disabled and the impoverished. Hardly pillars of the community. They were more like its ruined remains. They were the people you would find hovelled away in caves or huddled around the town dump, warming themselves at smoldering fires, foraging through trash for their next meal. When these people heard about this miracle-working Jesus, they left their caves, their corners in the alley, their lean-tos at the city dump. When they arrive, the Savior does not flinch or recoil. He looks into their sunken eyes and cups his hands around the dimply burning wick of their souls. He takes their palsied hands in his and steadies them. He touches their haggard faces and softens them. From his hands they receive healing. From his eyes, the hope to carry on. No wonder these people followed him so loyally. They were the dregs of society, yet he chose them to be the charter members of his community of faith. And singled them out to hear the greatest sermon ever preached.

But this sermon is hard to understand, especially if we are unable to see our reflection in one of the categories Jesus is blessing. Maybe this is easier: “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. ⁴“You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. ⁵“You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that



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can't be bought. ⁸“You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. ⁹“You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. Find yourself in the blessing yet?

At the end of last week, Pastor Tony and I found ourselves in St. Louis at a gathering of youth leaders of the ELCA from around the nation. At the evening session, in front of some 600 people, Pastor Tony and the Director of the Youth Gathering walked on stage and announced the new theme for the 2027 Youth Gathering in Minneapolis, MN. You would have been proud to watch Pastor Tony take the stage like the pro he is. He did not trip. He did not stutter. He beamed with pride to be chosen, as the one team leader out of twelve, to help reveal the theme. It was exciting to watch an entire year of dreaming and development come to life in a matter of minutes on the stage. And as excited as we are to announce the theme and get people excited to join us in Minneapolis – we were all too aware of the story unfolded and unfolding in the city, contracted in 2016, to host the 2021 (wait Covid) I mean the 2027 Youth Gathering. So, the night before the big reveal, nine of us sat around a table to rewrite the script to not sound tone-deaf for the struggle and heartache happening in a city we have come to love, in the midst of a people who are our friends and family in the body of Christ. As we edited and wrestled with words and meaning, I reflected on the words of this sermon Jesus preached to a people who were struggling to live under the oppression of Roman occupation and temple structure where the heartache was ignored for the priority of the laws of both Rome and God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. You are blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. You are blessed when you feel you have lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. Did you find yourself yet? You will not find yourself in one category of blessing – no Jesus wants more for you. To everything a season, my friends. Jesus preaches today to everyone, in every season, that we might find ourselves somewhere in God's blessing – that we would find out, that we are never outside of God's blessing – no matter how difficult the season. When Jesus preaches, the people listen. They were hungry for a new season of beginnings. If the season of Advent is about waiting for the light and the season of Christmas is about revealing the light, the season of Epiphany is all about living in the light. “Blessed are the poor” Jesus says. “Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” You are blessed,” Jesus says, “when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.” Jesus, I could not have said it better myself.

Sitting around the table, late into the night, supported and challenged by friends and colleagues I count as some of the dearest and most faithful people I may ever know in this life, I was struck by the words of blessing Jesus used to heal and offer hope. What did the people hear in his voice when he preached? What did they see in his face? The heart may be broken from a blow by the hard circumstances of life, from a fist of the enemy, or sometimes from the very hand of the one we trust the most. But once the shattering takes place, it is the hand of God that reaches into our broken places to pick up the pieces. And piece by painstaking piece, Jesus fits them together in such a way as to see himself in each of us. It is why I am convinced that the Holy Spirit moves in us and through us in exactly the moments when our seasons are changing. When, what we have been fighting in ourselves, and quite possibly with each other, is revealed and released. To everything a season. In every season, difficult or desired, a blessing from God. And from the stage on Friday night, as Pastor Tony announced the theme for the 2027 Youth Gathering – the moment seemed to announce a season of new beginnings. What's the theme you ask? “Imagine More.” And that, my friends, is exactly what Jesus is calling us to do as we hear him preaching this day; in your relationship with God; and with God's blessing and call on your life. “Blessed are you,” says Jesus. “Imagine More,” shouts Pastor Tony. “It is time,” whispers your heart. “Indeed it is. Thanks be to God. Amen.