

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church  
Davidson, North Carolina  
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor  
“Blest Are They”  
Micah 6: 1-8; Matthew 5: 1-17  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Epiphany  
January 29, 2017**

I was ordained as a minister on August 19, 1979. I am in my 38th year of writing and preaching sermons. I am going to do something today that I have never done in those 38 years.

I am not going to preach the sermon that up until last evening I had intended to preach. Indeed, I am not going to preach a sermon at all, at least in the sense that I usually think of sermons.

Today’s New Testament reading is from the Sermon on the Mount. According to Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount took place very early in Jesus’s ministry...in his first 100 days. His election had been unexpected and dramatic. At his baptism, a dove had descended from the sky, a first-century balloon drop, you might say, accompanied by the sonorous announcement: this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. And when he emerged from the baptismal waters, the same Spirit of God which had pronounced Jesus as Beloved led him into the wilderness. And in the wilderness, for forty days and forty nights, the Tempter bombarded Jesus with a compulsive barrage of superlatives, promising Jesus that he could be the biggest, the best, the greatest, the grandest if he would just give the Tempter his due. But Jesus, belovedness and blessedness coursing through his veins, stood his ground and strode out of the wilderness to begin assembling his cabinet. Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John— with their sunburned faces and chapped hands roughened from a lifetime of fishing, no one would have judged them to be the brightest and best. But Jesus put them on his team, as we heard in the Scripture text and Claire’s sermon last week.

And together Jesus and the disciples set out. According to Matthew 4:23-25, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”

The crowds were gargantuan. Fame and glory swirled around Jesus.

And it was at that very moment, according to Matthew, that Jesus put the brakes on his fame and glory and led his team, his disciples, up the mountain on a retreat. Jesus, always the teacher in Matthew, sat down, taking the posture of a first-century teacher.

His curriculum that day was the sayings we call the Beatitudes.

Sometimes, when we read the Beatitudes, we view them as laying out entrance requirements into the kingdom of heaven, a green card into eternal life.

But listen closely: Jesus does not say, blessed are YOU, at least not until the very last verse which is about being persecuted.

He says, "Blessed are THEY."

Watch for THEM, that is, those who have a special closeness with the divine. Look closely at those who are merciful, who are peacemakers, and so on. Watch them and listen to them, for they have much to teach you about what it means to live lives of blessedness.

And so, last night, I listened. I listened to one of THEM. I listened specifically to Mary Anna Bode.

A number of you did not know Mary Anna who died several years ago so I will tell you a bit about her.

The Presbyterian Church has been involved in mission work in the Middle East since the early 1800's. Mary Anna was a teacher, a mission co-worker, for many decades, for most of her adult life, in Egypt, Sudan, and Iran. She was tough; she held strong opinions which she did not hesitate to express.

And last night, she said to me, with authority: Step aside, Lib. Step aside. Remember what Jesus told the disciples after he had shared the Beatitudes with them: I have not come to abolish the Law. I have not come to abolish the Prophets. I have come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

So step aside, Lib. It is not about you and not about *your* words. Let the Law speak for itself. Let the Prophets speak for themselves. And above all, let Jesus who has fulfilled the Law and the Prophets speak for himself.

And so, my dear brothers and sisters, I am stepping aside.

Here is what the Law that Jesus came to fulfill says:

In the third book of the Law, Leviticus 19: 33-34: When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as a citizen. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.

From the prophet Micah whose words we have already heard: He has showed you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

From Jesus who fulfills the Law and the Prophets: For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in and welcomed me.

My dear brothers and sisters, this is the word of the Lord.