

Sermon for February 16  
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church  
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Jeremiah 17:5-10  
Psalm 1  
1 Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26

I recently read Tony Hillerman's autobiography, "Seldom Disappointed."  
When I started reading I thought the title reflected  
the good life that Hillerman had, that most of it had been good.  
Come to find out the title was based on one of his mother's sayings:

"Blessed are those who expect little, for they are seldom disappointed."

In the current maelstrom, it has become my "Words to live by."

But how low can one lower one's expectations to avoid disappointment.

My solution: I don't watch the news.

It may seem odd for someone who started his professional life as a journalist, but my wife and I confine ourselves to streaming the PBS Newshour,  
and we only watch it in the morning with breakfast  
so we have the day to get over whatever we see and hear.  
And even with that limitation we are overwhelmed  
with the constant barrage of negativity.

There once was time when those with power were constrained  
because they believed in a final judgment where the wrongs they did  
would weigh against them.

That belief seems to have been lost because those with power seem to have lost any sense of eventual judgment.

Among the prayers in the back of the Prayerbook [page 820] is this:

Almighty God, who hast given us this good land for our heritage:  
We humbly beseech thee that we may always prove  
ourselves a people mindful of thy favor and glad to do thy will.  
Bless our land with honorable industry, sound learning, and  
pure manners. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion;  
from pride and arrogance, and from every evil way. Defend  
our liberties, and fashion into one united people the multitudes  
brought hither out of many kindreds and tongues. Endue  
with the spirit of wisdom those to whom in thy Name we entrust  
the authority of government, that there may be justice and

peace at home, and that, through obedience to thy law, we may show forth thy praise among the nations of the earth. In the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail; all which we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Today's readings are a promise.

Those of you who are hurting will get better,

or in the words of Sonny Kapoor from the Best Exotic Marigold Hotel: "Everything will be alright in the end, and if it's not alright, it's not the end."

Or the Midwestern version I grew up with:

Work hard. Do your best. Do what is right. Trust in the Lord. It'll all work out.

What we get today in our readings: It's better to be on God's side.

From Jeremiah we get the warning:

Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals  
and make mere flesh their strength,  
whose hearts turn away from the Lord.  
They shall be like a shrub in the desert,  
and shall not see when relief comes.  
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,  
in an uninhabited salt land. ...

And from Psalm 1:

1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, \*  
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord, \*  
and they meditate on his law day and night. ...

4 It is not so with the wicked; \*  
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.

5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when judgment comes, \*  
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.

6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, \*  
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

And the Gospel for today is Luke's Sermon on the Plain.

I know it sounds familiar – "Blessed are the..."

It's easily confused with Matthew's Sermon on the Mount: the Beatitudes.

For Matthew, the Beatific commentary are all "Blesseds."

Luke, on the other hand, follows up the Blesseds with a set of Woes that resonate with Jeremiah and the Psalm.

When I was in seminary, one of the books I read for Pastoral Counseling was "When Bad Things Happen to Good People."

It's always an issue and question: Why is there suffering in the world?

I don't have an answer to that. Wish I did.

But I do have a counter question that perturbs me  
even more in light of today's readings.  
Why is it that: Good things happen to Bad People?  
Luke's "Woes" provide a bit of solace; perhaps a reminder of the judgment.

"But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.  
"Woe to you who are full now,  
for you will be hungry.  
"Woe to you who are laughing now,  
for you will mourn and weep.  
"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false  
prophets."

There's a hymn, *Heaven Shall Not Wait*, from the Iona Community in Scotland, written by John L. Bell and  
Graham Maule.

The first lines in the four verses echo Luke's Sermon on the Plain.

Heaven shall not wait  
For the poor to lose their patience...  
For the rich to share their fortunes...  
For the dawn for great ideas,  
thoughts of compassion divorced from cries of pain:  
For triumphant Hallelujahs, when the earth has passed  
and we reach another shore;  
Jesus is Lord in our present imperfection;  
his power and love are for now; and then for ever more.

That is the promise I have to believe in now.  
To believe God acts in our present imperfection and all will be well,  
eventually.  
For now, I can only offer another prayer.

Please open your prayer books and turn to page 815,  
and join me in the prayer For the Human Family:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us  
through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole  
human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which  
infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us;  
unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and  
confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in  
your good time, all nations and races may serve you in  
harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ  
our Lord. *Amen.*

The gift of Christ on the Cross is that we do not stand alone.  
If you hear someone from a pulpit or someone in power declare  
this group or those people do not belong with us,

open your eyes and you will see Jesus Christ  
standing with those who would be excluded.

Amen.