

Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
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Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
29 January 2023

Zephaniah 2:3, 3:12-13
Psalm 146
1 Corinthians 1:26-31
(Matthew 5:12a) Matthew 5:1-12a

Beatitudes: An Act of the Will to See Supreme Blessedness

Last weekend we celebrated Marian Festival, in honor of our Parish Patroness, Mary, Queen of Peace. We concluded the Festival on Monday with a Movie Night, which was quite well attended by many of you! We can all watch movies alone or in our own homes and on our own devices, but there was something special about being all together as fellow disciples. Having a shared experience of watching a beautiful movie on the big screen together—whether to inspire our faith or just for fun and fellowship. I look forward to seeing you all at another movie night soon!

Our feature this past Monday was a film directed by Juan Manuel Coteló called *Mary's Land*.¹ The movie is categorized as a documentary, but is played out as a pseudo-action/mystery/comedy, in which a “secret agent”—played by Coteló himself—is sent by his “boss” to investigate some curious people. The movie’s storyline says this:

Once upon a time, there was God. And that's the end of the story. Goodbye, Our Father. Farewell forever, heavenly beings. If we don't see you, we don't believe in you. We've chosen to live as if you didn't exist. However...millions of people keep speaking with Jesus Christ, whom they call “Brother.” And with the Virgin Mary, whom they call “Mother.” They believe we are all God's children and thus call him “Father.” The Devil's Advocate receives a new mission: to fearlessly investigate those who still trust Heaven's formulas. Are they swindlers? Swindled? If he discovers that their beliefs are bogus, our lives will remain the same. But...what if they're not a fairy tale?²

The agent is sent around the world to meet real people (this is the documentary aspect of the film; these are real people): a corporate business executive and former member of the U.S. State Department, a model and actress, a street missionary, a doctor, a singer and dancer, and more. The agent goes out to investigate these people who, in many ways, at one time were “blessed”

according to the world's standards. They "had it all": career, power, fame, status, money, popularity. The agent's mission: uncover the truth about why or how these people turned away from all those worldly "blessings."

Are they swindlers? Are they faking? Have they been swindled? Are they mentally ill or under the influence of a narcotic of some kind? Do they really talk to Jesus Christ as their "Brother", Mary as their "Mother", and God as their "Father"?

As the agent meets with each of these people, he learns the stories of their personal conversions. Not only how they came to gladly and willingly give up many of the things that the world considers as "blessings". But, even more importantly, he learns how their personal experience of God's love and mercy—along with Mary's tender care—has brought them healing from all the ways that the world's "blessings" had actually left them anxious, wounded, lost, and empty.

What these interviews reveal to us is something that we already know as members of the human race: that is, it's difficult to keep our hearts free in the midst of earthly possessions.³ The world was made good by a Good God.⁴ But, now that it's fallen, these goods are too often misused and get in the way of our relationship with God and our neighbors. Or, are used as a replacement for God.

In the midst of all that, it can be difficult to remember we're beloved children of God—blessed beyond measure—when we're so frequently presented with a false image of what "blessings" are "supposed" to look like. It can be difficult to remember we're beloved children of God when we're exhausted by the pursuit of these lesser "blessings" that can never truly satisfy. And that often make us aware of our short comings, our lackings, and the ways that we *don't* measure up.

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Last week, we heard a special Gospel for Marian Festival Weekend: The Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary.⁵ What made her say “yes” to the Lord? Even though she was troubled, had questions, and didn’t know how it would all work out? Was she a swindler who was faking it? Was she swindled or tricked by God? Or was she so filled with the Holy Spirit that there was no other blessing she could possibly say “yes” to than what God was offering her—even if it would include much sorrow that was to come.

The Gospel we would’ve otherwise heard last Sunday was The Call of the First Disciples.⁶ That is important context for us, because it’s the chapter just before today’s Gospel. What made those first disciples say “yes” to following the Lord? A better question, after hearing Jesus preach these words that we heard today, what made them continue to say “yes” to following the Lord? These words are known as the Beatitudes (a word that means “supreme blessedness”). These words turned the world the disciples knew upside down and inside out.

So, what made the disciples keep following Jesus? Were they swindlers who were faking it? Were they swindled or tricked by Jesus? Or, did hearing these words touch something deep inside them, a stirring in their heart that convinced them this was the deepest truth. This was finally the answer to what they’d been looking for. Filling the hole in their heart that every human has until we say “yes” to God and allow Him to fill it?⁷

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The Beatitudes turned the world that the disciples knew upside down and inside out. And it still does that for us today—*if* we take it seriously. That’s precisely the challenge for us as disciples. Can we take the Beatitudes seriously? Can we remember that we are blessed, even

when things don't go the way we think they should? Can we remember that we are blessed, even when we're poor, mourning, hungry, thirsty, persecuted, and insulted?

God doesn't delight in those things when we experience them. So, why doesn't He do something about it? The answer to that very good question is: *He has!* He's sent His Son to set us free from dependency on the world's "blessings" to measure our self-worth. To show us that—as His beloved children—our value, worth, and identity is found and measured only in Him.

If we stay faithful—which could be described as always remembering that we are His beloved children—then He gives us the grace to remain meek, merciful, clean of heart, and a peacemaker through anything we experience in this world. And we are not only promised to live eternally with Him in Heaven, but we also begin to experience a foretaste of His supreme blessings, even here on Earth—even amidst any suffering we go through.

As the Catechism puts it, when we are poor, humble and meek, and rely solely on God. When we await God's justice, rather than placing our hope in the justice of this world—when we do this, we in the end are the great achievement of the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit makes of us a people ready, waiting, and prepared for the Lord when He comes again.⁸

This is the message of those who gave their testimony in the movie *Mary's Land*. Many of them experienced loss of career, pain and suffering, even rejection from and being thought foolish by the world.⁹ Yet they knew they were truly blessed—not in the world's eyes—but in what matters to God. Because they know how much they are loved as a child of God. And they are so focused on sharing that Good News of true blessing with all the world. We are truly blessed when we hear testimony from people like them—or share our own testimony with others.

I'll conclude with a quote from one of the people we met towards the end of *Mary's Land*. Lola Falana was a popular singer, dancer, and actress in the 1960s and 70s, eventually being known as the "Queen of Las Vegas." In 1987 she began to suffer greatly from multiple sclerosis, and was partially paralyzed and blind, in addition to having her voice and hearing impaired. During her year and a half recovery, she spent a lot of time in prayer, and had a profound experience of the Lord's Presence, which led her to become Catholic.

Lola heard from Mary that she would one day go to Medjugorje—the place where Mary is said to frequently appear with messages of peace for our world. Because she was suffering from such physical pain, it didn't seem possible that she would be able to make such a long trip. However, she did eventually make it. During the interview, she reflected on that pilgrimage, as well as the pain she was still enduring. She said that people sometimes ask her how she could endure all this pain and still have such strong faith. She said this:

"We have to be more willing to do something, than to complain."

What beautiful advice for anything we go through in life! What Lola is pointing to is that interior battle that we all go through. The desire to work for something good, and the temptation to give up and complain when it's not easy. As Lola points out with her words and her life, it's an act of the will. Being willing to keep working for something good, and wanting that more than settling for complaints, which bring us down and prevent us from reaching our goal.

The life of the Beatitudes is the same. It's an act of the will. To be willing to *not* look so much at the sufferings of this world. Sufferings that are real, but that are passing. And to be willing to look more and more at the greater and lasting truth: We are beloved children of God—blessed beyond measure. And we can truly "rejoice and be glad", because the Holy Spirit is preparing us to live in God's Heavenly Kingdom, which will last forever!¹⁰

¹ Juan Manuel Coteló, *Mary's Land* (<https://www.infinitomasuno.org/en/marys-land/>)

² *Mary's Land* Storyline at IMDB (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3346766/>)

³ Adrien Nocent, OSB, "Fourth Sunday: God Chooses the Poor" in *The Liturgical Year: Volume Three: Sundays Two to Thirty-Four in Ordinary Time* (tr. By Matthew J. O'Connell) (2013) p. 72:

"The gospel preaches a world turned inside out. This is not to say it claims poverty to be something good or that God's blessing cannot be manifested in the gifts of material things. The gospel does, however, foresee that it is difficult to keep our hearts free in the midst of earthly possessions. That is the point of the beatitudes...

...

Within the total context provided by the readings of the Sunday, the thematic beatitudes are poverty of spirit, meekness, mourning, hunger and thirst, and persecution—in short, everything that represents weakness, everything the world looks down its nose at and has trouble taking seriously."

⁴ Genesis 1:31

⁵ Luke 1:26-38

⁶ Matthew 4:18-22

⁷ St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in his *Confessions*: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 716

⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:27

¹⁰ Matthew 5:12