

Years ago, I read a poem by Helen Mallicoat entitled *I AM*. From time to time, I've shared it with you, and I think today's text offers another chance to do so.

I was regretting the past
and fearing the future.

Suddenly, my Lord was speaking:

"My name is I AM"
The voice paused.

I waited.

The voice continued:

"When you live in the past,
with its mistakes and regrets,
it is hard.
I am not there.
My name is not - I WAS.

When you live in the future,
with its problems and fears,
it is hard.
I am not there.
My name is not - I WILL BE.

When you live in this moment,
It is not hard.
I am here.
My name is I AM."

Luke's Gospel, just like Matthew's and Mark's, has a central theme: God's future is certain. God's goodness, God's love, God's possibilities -- you might call the whole collection God's kingdom, or kin-dom, or world, or experience, whatever feels best -- God's goodness, love, and possibilities have burst into the present. The great I AM is right now. The life and ministry of Jesus bear witness to God's presence in the present.

I hope it's not lost on you that today's lection is preceded by a scene in which Jesus prays, high atop a mountain, and formally chooses his disciples. But unlike in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus offers a sermon from high atop a mountain, conjuring comparisons to Moses on Mt. Sinai, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus leaves his place of prayers, and joins his congregation on a level plain. This is not the Sermon on the Mount; this is the Sermon on the Plain. Jesus brings news that is accessible. This isn't vertical communication; this is lateral communication.

It gets better. I know we're in an awful hurry to get to the blessings and the woes of this text; it seems the beatitudes always take top billing. But don't discount verses 18-19. Jesus comes down the Mountain, into a congregation full of people with all sorts of backgrounds: The text mentions Judea, Jerusalem, even the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, Israel's version of the mountains, piedmont, and coastal plains. What that means is Jesus attracted a wide array of followers, some Jewish, some Gentile, with varying levels of status. They wanted to hear good news. Some sought healing from for physical ailments, others from mental and emotional trauma, all seeking hope, redemption, and wholeness in the brokenness of life. It seems to me there was some of everybody. And everybody, ALL, were made whole. God's power, presence, and possibilities all collided in a singular moment to bring healing to every kind of beloved, created, child of God. I AM is right now.

One more really interesting detail. This huge moment of shared realization happens, and the text tells us that Jesus looks up at his disciples before beginning to address them. He looks up! Does that sound threatening? Does that sound inaccessible? Does that sound dominant? Does that square with proclaimers of power? Jesus is credentialing his congregation.

Blessed are you who are poor, blessed are you who are hungry right now, blessed are you who are weeping right now, blessed are you who are marginalized and persecuted for the faith you seek to live out, for God's kingdom – God's goodness, love, and possibilities – is yours, and you will be fed, and you will find joy, and your reward will be great. Jesus is saying, "What I just did through God's power, you can do with and for another." Your compassion, your mercy, your justice right now, lived as intentional community, will cultivate a sharing of resources, will cultivate a world of belonging. When we love people, when we see their value, we prioritize neighbors and relationships over things and detachment. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, I'm looking at you," Jesus says.

We get some woes, too. But don't look at these woes as binary, or as equating wealth and resources with immorality. Remember, another central theme of Luke's Gospel is God's world bursting into the present. God's economy, God's governance, God's justice, God's charity, God's everything will usurp the fleeting and artificial mechanisms of the status quo. And remember, this crowd is one of have-nots AND haves. There are some privileged and powerful and wealthy congregants listening. Jesus says, "Herod's economy may feed you today, may shelter you from the grief and loss that often accompany poverty and marginalization, may even flatter and enhance your name. But artificial

umph isn't gonna be the final word in God's economy." If your value is rooted in what you can hoard and store up, the days are coming when you will eventually be hungry, when you will weep, when you will grieve, when you will lose the PR battle, when your consolation has been made complete. Ultimately, Caesar's world is gonna leave you wanting.

I think this is why Mallicoat's poem is on my mind today. How often do we allow the mistakes of our past, or the worries about our future to separate us from the present reality of God's immovable love in our lives? As both individuals and communities, we remember, perhaps even fixate on those things that make us vulnerable in the world. We save our monies; we build defenses; we enact legislation; we establish precedents, and behaviors, and traditions, all in the hopes of not having to rely on neighbor. That is, we do all we can to avoid vulnerability. Friends and family are nice, but greenbacks and crypto-currency are more secure; world peace sounds good, but it sure doesn't hurt to have a nuclear stockpile at the ready; yes, we believe in equality, but a lot more if it's in codex; the Spirit is a wonderful thing, but let's shape it in such a way as to make it more predictable. Too often, we ground our value in an artificial index. We choose to trust in finite systems rather than faith in God's provisions.

Let your mind drift to the Book of Acts, an account of the first formal congregation of Jesus followers, and a continuation of Luke's gospel.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke

bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:37-42).

This sounds to me like a manifestation of what Jesus preached on the plain. The poor in Herod's economy have found kinship in God's economy. The hungry in Herod's economy have found provisions from one another, not from manufactured marketplaces. Herod's economy offered them a false identity: lonely, forgotten, aggrieved, reviled, lifeless; God's economy reminded them of what was true – goodwill among people, with room to grow, and space to find and fulfil purpose and calling.

The inbreaking world that Luke's Gospel proclaims can come across as jarring, because upheaval of the status quo is disruptive in every way, even in just our imagination. Woe to us who have it good in a world ruled on Herod's terms. Not woe, because we are lacking in morality or virtue, but woe because we cannot see life beyond this lifelessness.

How could we feel whole without the things that artificially prop us up? And if you were someone who was wealthy, and popular, and powerful in the crowd in Luke 6, how excited would you be to hear about an intentional community that sold its possessions for the common good? Woe to you, with wealth, and leftovers, and notoriety, for your consolation has come. In this new world, the things of value in Herod's world cannot shield you from hunger, nor grief, nor marginalization. But there's something better.

I AM. Right Now.
Bob Stillerman
Sixth Sunday After Epiphany, 2-6-2022
Luke 6:17-26



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

The community will feed you, and care for you, and offer you value, and ultimately fill you up. What appears retributive in Herod's world, is actually restorative in God's world.

Herod says what you were will always determine who you will be, and that leaves no room for life in the present.

Jesus reminds us that it's never been a matter of was. For if we are God's beloved, our value is ever-present, and can never be discarded. And if our value is ever-present in God's presence, we will never be without a future-value.

God says, "I AM. Right now." Jesus reminds us that we live smack, dab in the middle of that right now. It seems to me then, that we have an open invitation to be God's people right now.

Blessed are those who live in the present and hear the voice of I am.

May it always be so! Amen.