



Grace Lutheran
Church, ELCIC

1273 Fort St., Victoria BC, V8V 3L4
Call any time ~ 250.383.5256

SERMONS



EPIPHANY 6C SERMON

TEXT: Luke 6:17-26 (Luke's Beatitudes and Woe-attitudes)

TITLE: "Life is a Rollercoaster"

I'm sure you're familiar with the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew (blest are the poor in spirit, blest are the meek, blest are those who mourn, and so on). Well, today's Scripture, from the Gospel of Luke, has a slightly different version of the Beatitudes, plus some Woe-attitudes ("woe to you who are rich," and so on). The versions in these two Gospels are two different remembrances of what Jesus said in that Sermon.

The first thing you notice about Jesus' sayings here, is that they are dramatic and almost unbelievable. For instance, in verse 20 Jesus says, "Blest are the poor." Normally we would say, "Blest are the rich!" But Jesus was not saying that it's good to be poor! No, the poor are blest because they have God's guarantee that they will be blest, as surely as day follows night. They're blest because they are on the road to blessing; a blessed outcome is assured.

The same goes for Jesus' promises of woe for the rich, and for those full of food and full of laughter. Jesus says, "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." He's not saying, "You laughers, you've been bad!" As if we are sentenced to mourn and weep because we've been laughing too much! Or that we are sentenced to be hungry, because we're too full. There are a lot of Bible verses that don't make sense when you take the words too literally, because they are poetic, and they have a deeper meaning than appears on the surface.

No, what Jesus is saying here, is: "When you're up, when you're high, when you're feeling on top of the world, be prepared, because, soon, it's going to be different."

Jesus' overall message here is: One day you're up, and the next day you're down. One day you're down, but don't worry, you'll be raised up again soon. You may be in misery now, but soon you'll be rejoicing. Today you may be happy about your good fortune and celebrating it,

but it won't be long until you'll be grieving over a sad loss. That's life in the Kingdom of God.

It's normal for us to go through dark periods in our lives – “Good Friday” periods. But Jesus promises that it won't be long until the tables are turned and we'll experience a joyful, resurrection period, a glorious time of happiness and joy. One day you're suffering as Christ did, and the next day you're celebrating resurrection with Christ. And vice-versa!

This is the rollercoaster of life. We are up for a while, then go over a hill and down for a while. Sometimes we're heading downward so fast that we think we're going to crash. In all of it, Jesus is saying, “Trust God.” Whatever state you happen to be in right now, pain or pleasure, weal or woe, remember: it's only temporary. Take the long view, God's view, because in the end your rollercoaster will straighten out and you'll come into station safe and sound. You'll step out onto the platform at the end of your ride, and you'll be amazed at what you went through, and say, “Woeeee! What a thrill that was!”

So, when something wonderful happens in your life, don't ever say, “Wow, I wasn't expecting this!” Likewise, when something horrible happens, don't ever say, “Wow, I wasn't expecting this!” Jesus is saying that those ups and downs are normal. Expect them. Expect the unexpected: whether it's unexpected success or unexpected disappointment.

Sometimes God seems to be cruel to us, picking on us, and we cry out, “Why me, Lord? What did I do to deserve this?” At other times we feel blown away by God's amazing grace and blessing. Then too, God wants us to ask: “Why me, Lord? What did I do to deserve this?”

One of the things God is always trying to do is show us Who's boss and show us Who's really in control, so we can relax and relish the rollercoaster ride.

You know, when you're on a rollercoaster, you can't control how far you go up or how far you go down, or how fast you go in this direction or that. I remember years ago I was on the huge rollercoaster at Hershey Park in Pennsylvania, not far from where my wife Dawn grew up. This rollercoaster went very high in the air, and in one place it actually spiraled and you turned upside down! But of course, this was safe because of the “g” forces, and we were well strapped in.

Once you're strapped into a roller coaster, locked into your seat and on your way, you certainly cannot get off before the end of the ride! The only thing you can control is how you're going to take those ups and downs.

We can do one of two things: either tense up and resist the motion, maybe freeze in fear, or: LET GO (not of the safety bar!), but let go inside, in your mind and spirit. Make a decision of trust. Establish in your mind, at the beginning of the ride, that this machine is safe, so I might as well relax and enjoy it.

The key is to trust in the safety of the wheels and tracks and pulleys, and trust in the Builder and Designer of the Rollercoaster. In life, you should decide ahead of time, "I'm safe if I hang on, because my Creator is all-powerful and all-loving (cf. Ephesians 3:20 and Romans 8:28). I'm going to let go and let God. I'm going to take a deep breath, relax, and see how much fun I can have on this thing. No matter how fast the straight stretches or how jerked about I am on the curves, I'm not going to resist its motion. I'm going to lean forward and say, 'Come on! Bring on the speed! Let's see how fast this baby can go! Let me feel the thrill of being pressed, hip and shoulder against the seat!'

Have you ever experienced the thrill of free falling? It's a terrible feeling if you're scared, but a wonderful feeling if you're able to let go, to take the risk and believe you're safe, and say to yourself: "Wow, my diaphragm feels like it's risen a foot! The wind is blowing my hair almost off my head! Whoopee! This is fun!"

I believe that Jesus' words here in today's text are an invitation: Welcome to life in the Kingdom of God. Welcome to my Rollercoaster. It's a thrill a minute! You never stand still. And whether you're showered with blessings or hammered with woe, remember, it won't be long until you'll be going back the other direction.

In terms of what St. Paul wrote in today's Epistle Lesson, you'll be alive and then you'll be dead. You'll be dead, and then you'll be alive again. You'll walk with Christ through the misery of Good Friday, and then you'll rise with Christ into joy on Easter.

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Welcome to the Kingdom Rollercoaster, the ride of a lifetime. The ride begins as soon as we're baptized and joined to Christ. From then on, we're either dying or rising. If we're in between, we can be sure it won't be that way for long.

I'm reminded of one of Frank Sinatra's old songs (from 55 years ago!) called "That's life." Here's some of it:

"That's life . . . that's what all the people say
You're ridin' high in April, shot down in May
But I know I'm gonna change that tune
When I'm back on top, back on top in June.

I said that's life (that's life), and as funny as it may seem
Some people get their kicks stompin' on a dream
But I don't let it, let it get me down
'cause this fine old world, it keeps spinnin' round.

I've been a puppet, a pauper, a pirate, a poet, a pawn and a king
I've been up and down and over and out and I know one thing
Each time I find myself flat on my face
I pick myself up and get back in the race..."

God grant each one of us the faith to do just that. Amen.

~ Pastor Jim Hill

(HYMN # 740 "God of the Sparrow")