

February 2, 2020 - Epiphany 4A

Scripture: Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

"The Cartography of Faith" - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Today, on this fourth Sunday of Epiphany, we hear the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount goes until the middle of chapter 7. One way to think of the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, is as a map which lays out how to find the Kingdom of God. The more I dove into the metaphor, the more interesting the idea of a spiritual map became. I thought about changing the title of the sermon to *"Oh, The Places You Will Go"*. So join me on a meandering pilgrimage.

Not so very long ago, most of us had an atlas in our cars. An atlas is really a series of smaller maps that, if laid out next to each other, would create a much larger map of the area. So an atlas of Maine would have a bunch of smaller maps for various areas - the areas of the coastline along the Eastern Seaboard, including the DownEast up North and East of here, the White Mountains to the West, the Northern tier from Presque Isle to Allagash towards Quebec, and the vast interior, including the logging roads in Aroostook county, and the Appalachian chain drawing down through the center of the state.

Think of Micah 6:8 as the atlas that guides us into the smaller maps of the Sermon on the Mount.

When I was a teenager, I spent my summers at an outdoor adventure camp. I went on several long canoe and backpacking trips. We were taught how to use a compass and read a topographic map. Without ever having been to the place before, say the Beartooth Mountains in Montana, we could pull out our compass and topographic map and figure out that the valley between those two mountains was passable and easily hiked, and that other valley was not. Before we even started for the day, we knew how much elevation we would hike, how far it was to the place we wanted to camp, and what obstacles or pathways might be along our way. That is a ton of information before ever stepping foot into the actual place.

I am not good at telling you which way is due North, but without ever having been to a place, I have a high degree of confidence of finding my way to it even without a map. I attribute that to some weird innate talent and also being well-trained in map-reading. Once you know how to read a map, you know both what you are looking at in your terrain and how to get places based on what you see around you - whether you have a map or not.

There was a period of transition between using maps and relying exclusively on things like Google Maps to get places. In that time, there was a worldwide game called

Geocaching, where people would use GPS devices and the digitized maps on them to find notes or gifts from other people in unusual places. You would go online to a Geocaching site and find out what was near you, download the information to your GPS device and then go looking for the geocache. It was like an ongoing scavenger hunt that required technology and map-reading. I knew geocaching was done as a big thing, though, when we were driving out here to Maine from Montana in 2009 and I stopped at a rest area to see if I could buy a map. I was still using a flip-phone back then. The attendant told me, “*Yeah...we don’t sell maps anymore. Don’t you have Google Maps on your phone?*” I showed him my flip phone. He said, “*Oh. I see.*”

So we don’t use maps the same way now. I don’t even have to use a map. My map-reading skills have been offloaded to the voice in Google Maps, which I gave an Australian accent, by the way. In many ways, map-reading is a great loss. The tech is amazing, but map-reading and map creation, cartography, is a skill worth valuing.

In the Middle Ages in Europe, maps were very different from what we had even just 10 years ago, but they still generated significant information. Look at the cover of our bulletin this week. On it is the Hereford Map, which hung in Hereford Cathedral, which was a pilgrimage point in England near the border of Wales. The map was created around 1300 AD.

To any modern map-reader, what is left of them, this map is unintelligible. But in the Middle Ages, most everybody would have understood how to read this map. Before the age of exploration, which was to come about 200 years after this map was created, the world was understood very differently than how we understand it. In Europe at least, maps were not created with our present location as central. They were created with Christ overseeing the world. Everything oriented according to the theological and spiritual. That is why right in the center of this map is Jerusalem. It is also why most Medieval maps had the East at the top rather than the North. An eastern oriented map means our directional focus is always on Christ.

This, then, is a pilgrimage map. It shows great thinkers and good restaurants alike along the way, because in the Middle Ages the value of the baker, the shoemaker, the restaurateur, the great theologians of the day, and the priest and king were all considered of great, different, but equal value. In the Middle Ages, people knew their place in the world spiritually, socially, and literally.

“This map, which pictures the creation transformed by the presence of God, teaches us to find our place in the world”¹

¹ Deam, Lisa. *A World Transformed : Exploring the Spirituality of Medieval Maps*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015. pg 4.

In this way, everyone looking at this map not only knew people of significance in the faith, they knew places of significance for the faith, and they knew that small places along the way were significant as well. Which meant they knew, very clearly, that *they were significant* in the eyes of God.

The way we walk with the Lord matters greatly. Thus, Micah tells us how we walk with the Lord.

“Walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8)

“Humbly” here means something like *“intentional and focused,”* meaning our sense of our walk is governed by the focus, God, not on what we want or think about the path the map describes. The cover of our atlas in Micah describes the Kingdom of God as a pilgrimage which has the mountains of Justice on one side and the coastline of Loving-Kindness, or mercy, on the other side. We know our place in this map by focusing our journey on God and God alone.

Jesus sits down on the hillside, with his disciples next to him, opens the atlas and tells the crowd about the different maps inside the atlas. The contours of the valleys, the heights of the mountains, the shorelines of lakes and oceans, the crossing points of rivers, are all disclosed in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a circuitous path. You think the path is taking you one direction, but you are led another.

The map metaphor is helpful here with the Beatitudes in particular because our desire and temptation is to read the Beatitudes as *“if ... then”* equations.

If I am poor in spirit, then I will inherit the Kingdom of God...If I am meek, I will inherit the earth...If I am a peacemaker, then I will be a child of God.

And certainly, there is some great value in this ethical and moral approach to reading the Beatitudes this way. There is nothing wrong with understanding these as a way to live a life. But each of our Beatitudes begins with the word *Blessed*. In Greek, this word is *markarioi*. Markarioi, or blessed, is first and foremost a state of being, not an action. The word was originally used to address gods, as in *“Blessed are you, O Lord...”* Then it was used to speak of the dead, as in *“...the blessed dead”*. Then it was used to speak well of the elite and wealthy, the ancient version of the Prosperity Gospel, as in, *“Your wealth and status show that you are blessed”*. Only with Jesus does the focus of being blessed turn its focus onto the common and suffering people of the world.² A huge and significant change. Like following a map oriented toward a particular direction, *blessed* is a

² From the Lectionary Lab Live podcast with John Farless. Found at <https://johnfairless.podbean.com/e/the-fourth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-a-february-2-2020/>. Accessed 01/30/2020.

directional focus, not first a call to action. Being blessed is a *place* in the landscape of the spirit much more than an action that gains something for us.

Understanding the Beatitudes as a map changes the “*if...then*” to a “*because...therefore*”. *Because there is a steep ridge here, therefore we look for this.* This allows us to treat the Beatitudes as a map of the Kingdom of God. The map is framed on two poles between *the poor in spirit (vs 1)* and *the persecuted (vs 8)*, because both circle back to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Notice how, when thinking in terms of a map, it is like reading the topography of our faith. The Beatitudes become like the Hereford pilgrimage map with Christ at the top, governing the focus and direction of our journey. Because Christ holds the earth in his grasp, therefore we are able to seek and find the presence of Christ in this world.

Because God eliminates all fear in the Kingdom of Heaven, therefore those who are poor in spirit are found in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Because the Kingdom of God is where all things are fulfilled, therefore the strength required to turn away from the things of this world will lead us along the proper path.

Because we are already children of God, therefore we are peacemakers here on earth.

Because faith is a gift of heaven, therefore persecution on earth is not a thing to be feared.

Reading a spiritual map means we rely on not just the landscape that we can see, but also the landscape we cannot see. Feelings, experience, the subtleties of relationship and how those taste, smell, sound are all waypoints and landmarks on our pilgrimage through this earth. It may be that you are on a part of the journeying that has not been traversed yet, and you are being asked in your walk of faith to become a cartographer of the faith for your particular landscape. Because you are a pilgrim of God, therefore you can see the mountains and valleys, the rapids and the rockslides, the pathways and the blockades here.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a group called The Situationists. They were anti-authoritarian Marxists.

*“The situationists believed that the shift from individual expression through directly lived experiences, or the first-hand fulfillment of authentic desires, to individual expression by proxy through the exchange or **consumption of commodities**, or passive second-hand*

alienation, inflicted significant and far-reaching damage to the quality of human life for both individuals and society”³

The Situationists believed that we had to intentionally create ‘situations’ or ‘spectacles’ that would reintroduce authenticity and ‘realness’ back into our everyday lives. One of the things the Situationists would do was to create feeling maps of cities, or maps based on experiences, or colors. They would hand these out and have people find their way around using these new maps of familiar places. My favorite Situationist trick was to try to navigate a large city using the map of a different, large city. Once I found this out, I have a dream of creating a map app for phones that, when you enter a destination, your phone imports in an alternate map. I need directions to, say, Sugarloaf, but now I have a map that shows me how to get to the Dolomites in Italy. The point was that how we read a map and experience the place a map is referencing can be very different from how we think it to be, and by radically altering our experience of what we expect, we will see things we have never seen before.

If you put Christ in the East and at the top of your map, what would the landmarks and waypoints be along the way? What would the feelings and experiences that would be on your map? Where would the best thinkers, the best restaurants, the best pathways be on your map? How different would this familiar space be if the map were completely different?

Remember, a spiritual pilgrimage map not only makes Christ significant because that is the focus, it also makes significant everyone along the way, including you, because we are that significant to God and Christ.

Listen closely for the experiences and feelings of others. Notice the landscapes and contours of the Kingdom of Heaven around us even now.

Read the strange map of Christ and find your way back to the loving-kindness and justice of the Lord with whom we walk humbly and intentionally.

Amen

³ Information on The Situationists was found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situationist_International. Accessed 01/31/2020.

Postlude:

I like the way Augustine, seen on your map by the way laying in a grave with his head pointing to Rome, maps out the contours of the Beatitudes.

Here the first place is given to fear, which is suitable for the humble, of whom it is said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," that is, those who think not high things, but who fear.

The second is piety, which belongs to the meek; for he who seeks piously, reverences, does not find fault, does not resist; and this is to become meek.

The third is knowledge, which belongs to those that mourn, who have learned to what evils they are enslaved which they once pursued as goods.

The fourth, which is fortitude, rightly belongs to those who hunger and thirst, who seeking joy in true goods, labour to turn away from earthly lusts.

The fifth, counsel, is appropriate for the merciful, for there is one remedy to deliver from so great evils, viz. to give and to distribute to others.

The sixth is understanding, and belongs to the pure in heart, who with purged eye can see what eye seeth not.

The seventh is wisdom, and may be assigned to the peacemakers, in whom is no rebellious motion, but they obey the Spirit.⁴

⁴ from the Catena Aurea, by St Thomas Aquinas. Found at <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/catena1.ii.v.html>.