Blessed are the rich, for they can buy the earth.

Blessed are the powerful, for they will control the people.

Blessed are the war makers, for they will conquer the world.

Blessed are the greedy, for they will gain extravagance.

Blessed are the mighty, for they will instill fear.

Blessed are the comfortable, for they will want for nothing.

Blessed are the apathetic, for they can look the other way.

Blessed are the corrupt, for they will get their way and not get caught.

Blessed are the liars, for they will always evade truth.

This is the word of the powers and principalities. Thanks be to Empire.

This is the way of the world today. The rich, powerful and mighty have all the control. The poor, meek and hungry get pushed to the side. This was the way of the world two thousand years ago, and it had been for a long time before that.

But then, a wandering rabbi came onto the scene to flip the script. He had traveled throughout Galilee teaching in synagogues, proclaiming good news and curing every disease and sickness among the people. As he went, more and more people began to follow him. So, he walked up a mountain, sat down, and began to teach the people.

The way of the world and the people the world chose was not the way of God, nor the people God chose. Jesus flipped the tables on them, turning everything the world had ever said and taught them on its head.

Turns out, God is not on the side of the powerful, but is without question on the side of the oppressed and lowly. It's not the rich and mighty who are blessed, but it is the poor and meek.
Be wary of people in positions of power who say God is on their side. Be wary when those people use God’s name to inflict violence and harm. Be wary.

The powerful in our world are terrified of the Blessed; they always have been. The Blessed threaten the powerful’s way of life. If the Blessed really are the Blessed, then the powerful stand to lose their power and control in the world.

Howard Thurman, a prolific writer, pastor, educator and civil rights activist, is one of the great saints in the great cloud of witnesses. In his autobiography With Head and Heart, he writes about an experience with his daughters when he took them to his home state of Florida to visit family. Eager to share with his daughters his childhood haunts and memories, he took them on a walk to the river he had been baptized in. While on the walk, they passed a playground and his daughters excitedly said, “Look, Daddy, let’s go over and swing!” The problem was, it was a “white’s only” playground.

Howard Thurman found himself in what he describes as “the inescapable moment of truth that every black parent in America must face soon or late.” He said to his daughters, “You can’t swing on those swings.” When they asked him why, he said, “When we get home and have some cold lemonade, I will tell you.”

So they went home and had their lemonade and he said to his daughters, “It is against the law for us to use those swings, even though it is a public school. At present, only white children can play there. But it takes the state legislature, the courts, the sheriffs and policemen, the white churches, the mayors, the banks and businesses, and the majority of white people in the state of Florida—it takes all these to keep two little black girls from swinging in those swings. That is how important you are! Never forget, the estimate of your own importance and self-worth can be judged by how many weapons and how much power people are willing to use to control you and keep you in the place they have assigned to you. You are two very important little girls. Your presence can threaten the entire state of Florida.”

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1 Howard Thurman, With Head and Heart, 97.
The estimate of someone’s importance and self-worth can be judged by how many weapons and how much power people are willing to use to control them and keep them in the place they have been assigned.

Jesus did not come into this world in any type of grand fashion. He was not born into wealth. He was not born into the dominant group of society. Jesus was a Jew. Jesus was poor. Jesus was a member of a minority group. And he threatened everything the people in power had. King Herod and the religious officials were so scared of him that they tried to kill him at his birth. But he grew up and he grew up to be exactly what they feared. He went around talking to, welcoming and empowering women, foreigners and children. He healed the sick, homeless folks on the side of the road. He preached the exact opposite of what the world did. This poor Jewish man stepped out of the place he had been assigned, encouraging others to do the same. The religious officials were more terrified than ever and worked with Pilate to achieve what they had tried at Jesus’ birth, and they killed him.

Our world today is no different; there are systems in place to control people and keep them in the place they have been assigned. And like Howard Thurman told his daughters not all that long ago, people use all the power they can to do this: legislatures, police, courts, multibillion-dollar businesses and sometimes even churches to keep people in the place they have been assigned.

But Jesus tells us of another way, and it’s not the way of Empire. He lays it all out for us right here in the beatitudes. He tells us who we should be for, who we should defend, who we should care for, and how we are to exist as his followers in this world. He calls us and implores us to stand where he stands, to stand with the Blessed.

The beatitudes are about both the here and now, and the not yet. There is future hope and promise for the Blessed. In the passage we read from Revelation this morning, we heard about the ones seated before the throne of God. They are the ones who have “come out of the great ordeal.” These are the Blessed Jesus preaches about in the Beatitudes: the poor in spirit, those who mourned, the meek,
the hungry and thirsty. And did you hear the promise, the good news? The one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will be safe from the powerful who fear them. They will hunger and thirst no more. They will not be struck by the sun or any other scorching heat. They won’t have to endure any more systems that control them and try to keep them in the place they were assigned on earth. They will be led to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every single tear from their eyes. The kingdom of heaven is theirs.

There is a future hope and promise, but that doesn’t excuse us from standing with the Blessed here and now. We said the Lord’s Prayer together earlier and prayed, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This is the already and not yet nature of the beatitudes. You can hear it in the verb tense, “Blessed are...for they will...” The Blessed are among us here and now, and yes, they will be led to the springs of the water of life where God will wipe away every single tear from their eyes. But they are here among us now, they have not yet come out of the great ordeal because they are in it right now, and Jesus implores us to stand with the Blessed even if it costs us everything.

Listen now, for this is where the Lord stands:

Blessed are the poor in spirit who lost their jobs during the pandemic and aren’t sure how they’re going to pay rent today, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the Black families who mourn because their sibling, child, cousin, friend was killed by police, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the 545 meek children whose parents cannot be found after they were forcibly separated from them at the border, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who are hungry and thirsty and don’t know if they will eat today, for they will be filled.

Blessed are those who are merciful when the world demands anything but, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the married couples with pure love in their hearts but
who fear their legal status of marriage may be taken away because they are married to someone of the same sex, for they will see God.

Blessed are the protestors marching for peacemaking and justice, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted on account of their race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status or ability, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when you stand on the side of the Blessed, when you stand where God stands. Even if people, including the people close to you, revile you, persecute you, and utter all kinds of terrible things about you on God’s account.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Amen.