

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER



February 1, 2026

BLESSED

when we don't want to be

by Drew Downs

Jesus has a different view of blessing than we hear from prosperity preachers and the kitchen table wisdom of things always working out and happening for a reason. A view that is troubling to the idea that we get what we deserve and that goodness is rewarded and that present comfort is a gift from God and not the project of wealth creation, say, or the fortune of being born into a particular family in a particular time, with all the privilege and none of the guilt.

His words remain resoundingly radical given our world of hierarchies and violence; all the ways we separate and condemn. So he says that we are blessed in suffering, in longing for change, in knowing that other people are struggling, and even when we step in and take the lashes for others. And we know by this point that this isn't reward, or a proclamation of what is just, but that we can be the blessing in our neighborhoods and we can literally save lives.

AFTER EPIPHANY

2026

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Annual Meeting Rescheduled

From the safety, warmth, and relative comfort of the kitchen table, a sofa, or even the bed, we could stream a Sunday service or pray the daily office with the Venite App. In a small way, it felt like pandemictide again. Separate, unable to connect.

As I shared last week, I don't like to close the church. Posted services, dates, and times are important. To be here in case others are. We protect one another and that can mean staying home. And it can mean showing up. But when the county tells us to stay off the roads . . . that settles it. Or it should.

So we take the opportunity presented to us to prepare again for the annual meeting. And to be honest, I'm grateful. More time to work on the slides, the presentation, better chance of a good turnout. Of course, my address was tied to that week's gospel, so let's pretend we were all here for it! Smile and nod and be like, yeah, we just heard that, of course!

Our bylaws encourage us to give the congregation enough time to hear about a congregational meeting and make arrangements to attend. So the rescheduled date is February 8th after the 10:00 service. Our backup date is February 15th, if we have *another* incredible storm system show up on Saturday night. How about we not; I'm just saying we should announce it now, just in case. It is the Midwest.

So join us February 8th and come prepared to gather, to share, to participate in the life of St. Stephen's with hope and joy!

With love,
Drew+

AFTER EPIPHANY

2026

FOR SUNDAY

Epiphany 4A

February 1, 2026

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

AFTER EPIPHANY

Reflection

The story moves quickly up to this point. Chapters three and four fly with the introduction of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus, the temptation in the wilderness, and the calling of the disciples. And in the last verses of chapter four, it highlights the expanding fame and interest in Jesus, particularly as a healer. This is important to note as the crowds that have formed to follow the one who heals people and exorcizes demons walks up a mountain and starts to preach a three chapter sermon that begins with a transformative vision we call the Beatitudes.

Jesus offers a collection of blessings that, taken individually, seem far from the grace of God. And there is beauty here, isn't there? Because it uses our expectations against us. Blessed is a word we attribute to God's grace, coming as a reward for good behavior in the here and now. We say we are blessed with love or shelter from the cold or a job during tough times. Jesus turns this on its ear by suggesting that we are blessed in situations we don't associate with *benefit* — poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness — and that benefit comes *later*.

Imagine these hearers, bringing their loved one to be healed, to follow Jesus as the Messiah, thinking he would deliver *them* from evil (which implies, I suspect, into greatness) only to have him say: blessed are *you* when you suffer. If they are stuck on greatness, this is a hard message, but if they aren't, if all they know is challenge, if all they see is struggle, then all of this hits different.

When we take them as a whole, too, we can see a message that is way more than comfort and way more than encouragement and is about sharing a fundamental theology of God's love for those who feel the pain of their neighbors, who long for more for them, for the people of their community, who see the suffering and pray and beg and fight for change and are willing to put their body on the line for it. For the love of all that is good. For love. For God.

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