

Epiphany 4 (A)
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Text: Matthew 5:1-12

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One of my favorite TV shows of the last few years is “Stranger Things.” It takes place in the 1980s and tells the story of a group of kids from Hawkins, Indiana, and how their town is under attack by monsters from a parallel dimension they call “the Upside Down.” It’s a little bit Science Fiction and a little bit Horror. I love all the 80s cultural references, and especially the music. I love the relationships between the main characters. This group of kids are friends who are there for each other to the end, even while they can also be just a little bit snarky with each other at times. And I especially love the creative, imaginative way the show pictures the Upside Down. It’s a mysterious place where all the really scary monsters come from. It’s not only dangerous (because of the monsters). It’s a reflection of this world—Hawkins, Indiana, exists in the upside down, but *different*. The whole Upside Down is hostile to life as we know it, as one of the characters discovers when he gets trapped there. The sky is red, with lightning flashing all the time. There are weird growths snaking over everything. And, of course, there are the monsters.

It’s a fun, entertaining show, and sometimes a little creepy. And I wonder whether, if Jesus had access to our cultural phenomena, he would say to us: you don’t realize it, but you are living in the Upside Down. You do not live in the good and beautiful world that God desires for everyone, a world of peace and compassion and justice and blessing. Instead, you live in a world of violence and greed and selfishness, a world of hate and revenge and resentment. Of course, there’s an element of hyperbole here. The world we live in is also unimaginably beautiful, and people can be astonishingly kind and generous, even heroic in how they give of themselves. We live in a world that is both/and. It’s beautiful, with genuinely beautiful people who care for others in truly self-sacrificing ways, and at the same time we live in the Upside Down, with monsters aplenty.

Sometimes we do see the monsters. They shoot up a school or a dance hall or a grocery store for no apparent reason at all, killing innocent people who were just living their lives. But the thing that’s harder to see is how the systems that shape our lives can be monstrous. Take, for example, the economic system. On the one hand, it’s great. It allows us to have jobs and buy food and pay for someone to come fix our heater when it’s not working. At the same time, it’s monstrous because of the extreme inequality in our world, how CEOs pile up their billions and those earning minimum wage struggle just to pay rent. Or the justice system—it’s great because it gives us a way of managing our disputes without resorting to violence. But it’s also monstrous because of how the wealthy have a different justice system from everyone else. Accountability and punishment are very different for those with power and those without. The health care system and the education system are wonderful because they provide health care and education. But they’re also monstrous because of how they favor some and neglect others. Those who are neglected tend to be poor or people of color.

It takes an upside-down kind of wisdom to live as God’s people in a world like this, to know that there are monsters lurking, to know that the monsters are not what God intends for the human

family, and to be able to live with courage and hope. The Beatitudes in our Gospel reading for today are Jesus' upside-down wisdom. It's Jesus' way of saying that there is an incredible blessing that comes with attending to the grief and pain of life instead of turning away from it or blaming the victims. You are blessed when you have seen the truth about this upside-down world because then your heart is open for God to do something new to bring healing to our world. You are no longer in bondage to the illusion that prevents so many people from seeing how things really are. Society tries to train us to believe that the race is always won by the fastest runner, and the battle is always won by the strongest warrior, and everyone gets what they deserve. Jesus' upside-down wisdom helps us recognize the ways in which this world isn't like that, and it isn't what God desires for us.

So blessed are you who have experienced the crushing power of poverty, because you know how deeply we all need a power greater than ourselves to bring change to our world. Blessed are you who mourn, who grieve for the injustice and pain of our world, because your hearts are open to the kind of comfort God gives. Blessed are you who are meek and gentle, who don't smash your way through life, who don't let your desires and ambitions make others your victims. Your kindness will lead the way to the future. Blessed are you who hunger and thirst for things to be right in this world because your heart has been broken by witnessing so much unnecessary and unjust suffering. That deep sense of longing you feel for what is just and right for all people will be satisfied.

The most important thing about our life together as Christians, about gathering each week for worship and fellowship and to study together, is that we are opening our hearts to Jesus' vision for the world touched by God's healing power, where the Upside Down is turned right side up by God's grace and forgiveness and compassion. Being the community of Jesus is all about letting Jesus shape our values, our hopes and our desires, so that through our lives God's healing power can be at work. God doesn't want there to be the monsters of greed and hate and bigotry and violence. And God is inviting us to follow Jesus in his way of love and service and humility and generosity, so that through us God's Spirit can be breathing new life into the human family. And it is particularly Jesus' most challenging words that have the power to help us see with special clarity how faithfulness to Jesus' way of love is what the world so desperately needs. Only love has power to change the world, to make it right-side-up.

Imagine that life is sort of like a creative writing class. Everyone is creating a story with their lives, the story of who they are. Unfortunately, lots of people keep working from the same old prompts that got us where we are in the first place: How can I get more wealth and power and status? Or how can I get more friends and fun and recognition? There are lots of variations on those same old prompts—the same old wants and drives and desires—that people have been working off of from the beginning. And they are the reason the world we live in looks like it does. But when we are in conversation with Jesus about what makes a joyful and meaningful life, we can try some new prompts for writing the story of our life. Jesus points us to the true joys of being connected to others, to our Creator and to the earth—the joy of being grounded in and directed by love!

When Jesus' way of love is our starting point, maybe the story we'll tell with our lives will be about being merciful, so that we are a breath of fresh air for the people we know. Maybe the story we'll tell with our lives will be about being a peacemaker, someone who is able to help people who are at odds with each other bridge the gap between them and move toward reconciliation. Maybe we'll be known as the person who is steady and reliable and caring, or the one who is passionate and lively and generous, or the one who makes people feel seen and welcome, and helps grow a sense of community among people. When Jesus' way of love is our starting point, maybe we'll be known as someone who is patient and kind, never envious or boastful or arrogant. When Jesus' way of love is our starting point, we are the presence of God's compassion and grace for the world. Jesus' way of love helps us tell a story with our lives that is genuinely human. And genuinely blessed. Thanks be to God. Amen.