

Not Safe
[Matthew 5:1-12](#), [Micah 6:1-8](#)
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Earlier this week, I was driving Calvin and Lewis to the Steveston Library, and Calvin was reading a book in the back seat of our car – one of those books filled with lists of interesting facts and trivia. And he asked me, Dad, what’s the Cold War? I tried to think of a way to explain that was appropriate for children – Ok, so for about 50 years, there were two very powerful countries that didn’t like each other, and didn’t trust each other, and they both had these very powerful bombs that could destroy whole cities in a second, and they were so worried and frightened of each other that they kept building more and more of these bombs, so that if they ever actually used them, the whole world would blow up and everyone would die. And we called that the Cold War. And Calvin said – wow, that’s crazy. Good thing they didn’t start fighting. Were you alive then? Were you scared? And yes, I was alive during the Cold War – not for the whole thing, but for a chunk at the end of it. But I can’t remember really being scared. I was still a kid, and I wasn’t really paying attention to geo-politics, and honestly, nobody around me was acting scared. Everyone just acted like things were normal – for fifty years, everyone had been living with the idea that the entire world could blow up at any moment, and after awhile you just got used to it, you would go about your day and try not to think about what might happen if some politician somewhere has a bad day. And that

really is crazy. Building all those bombs, setting up a world where if one tiny thing goes wrong, everybody dies, that's crazy, but accepting it as normal is somehow even crazier.

And as I was explaining all this to Calvin and Lewis, I wondered what they might say in thirty years, to any children they might have, about what it was like living in this moment in history, during this strange and stressful time. For the past decade or so, it feels like all the structures of our world are falling apart – all the predictable political alliances, economic relationships, our health care systems, educational institutions, media sources, global climate, everything that we rely on to make sense of our world and organize our lives, it's all just disintegrating all around us. People are trying to build new structures, new institutions, new ways of managing our world, and some of those people are well-intentioned, and some of them are monsters, and it's still unclear who is going to win and what kind of world is going to emerge from the rubble of the old one. And in the midst of all of this, we're just down here at the bottom, trying to survive, trying to make sense of a world that doesn't really make sense anymore. Even when things are spinning out of control, we still want to pretend that our world is still normal, our world is still safe, we want to go on caring about all the old meaningless things like sporting events and award show nominations and stock market prices, but it's hard to block out all the craziness, and even if we could, do we really want to? Do we actually want to just accept all of this as normal?

And as crazy as our world feels right now, it wasn't all that different from the world that Jesus lived in. When Jesus started his ministry, it had only been about 90 years since the Romans had first conquered Jerusalem, and only 60 years since Herod the Great had put down the last revolt and firmly incorporated Judea and Galilee as provinces of the new Roman Empire. This means that there were still people alive who could remember what life was like before the Romans came, who had heard from their parents or grandparents stories about the days before the Empire arrived and destroyed everything. But as the decades passed, and all around them all they could see was tyranny and oppression, the agents of Roman power using fear and cruelty and need to keep the people in line, it got harder and harder to see that there was any other way of living besides the Roman way, the Empire way. It got harder and harder to resist the urge to just go along with the pain and the bloodshed, keep your head down, protect yourself and your family, act like all this is just normal, just the way it is, the way it's always been, the way it always will be. When you read the gospels, the oppressive presence of Roman power is impossible to miss – Herod, Pilate, Augustus, Tiberius, these men are constantly lurking in the background of the story, and everyone in this world knew that at any moment they could insert themselves into your life and bring ruin and destruction down on you. Already in the Gospel of Matthew, we've seen Herod massacring the children of Bethlehem, we've seen John the Baptist arrested and thrown in jail for speaking truth to power. If you were living in this world, every

instinct for self-preservation and self-protection would be telling you to stay safe, don't do anything foolish, keep quiet, keep compliant, and just keep pretending that all of this is normal.

And if you were living in that world – if you were feeling that temptation to treat the tyranny and cruelty you saw all around you as just normal, accepted parts of life – then the words we read this morning from Matthew chapter 5, the opening words from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, these words will sound revolutionary. We've heard the Beatitudes so many times that we don't always really listen to what they're saying – we start thinking they're just nice sounding platitudes, simple home-spun common sense, but when you understand the world Jesus is living in, you will understand that these words are not safe. This isn't just a sermon. It's a manifesto. It's a call to action, action that is profoundly counter-cultural and revolutionary. In each and every one of the Beatitudes, Jesus is setting out a vision for a world that runs completely opposite to the world that his listeners live in, completely opposite to the world that we live in. When the world tells us that success means being wealthy and powerful – Jesus calls us to be poor in spirit and meek, to embrace our weakness and vulnerability. When the world tells us to keep up the illusion of happiness and success, to pretend that we're doing just fine and never let anyone know that we're hurting – Jesus calls us to mourn, to admit the pain we're feeling and grieve for the state of our broken world. When the world tells us to just give up, stop fighting and accept mediocrity and corruption as normal – Jesus calls us

to hunger and thirst for righteousness, to never be satisfied so long as evil continues to flourish. When the world tells us to crush anyone who opposes you, to meet force with force and hatred with hatred – Jesus calls us to be merciful, peacemakers, to remember the grace we've been given and extend that same grace to our neighbours and even our enemies. When the world tells us to compromise, to set aside morality and make a deal to get ahead – Jesus calls us to be pure in heart, to live with integrity so that our words, our actions and our hearts are always aligned with God's will for us. When the world tells us to protect ourselves at all costs, to do whatever it takes to survive and stay safe – Jesus calls us to accept persecution, suffering, danger and pain all for the sake of righteousness, commit ourselves so completely to loving God and loving our neighbour that we will lay down our lives for their sake and for the gospel. At every step, with every word, Jesus is calling his listeners to stop acting like this broken world is normal, stop treating evil as inevitable, and instead open your eyes and see the world the way Jesus sees it, open your eyes to see the kingdom of heaven right here, here in this world, here all around you.

Because this world that Jesus is describing is not some pie-in-the-sky dream. It is not just a promise of some future glory we receive after death. Each and every call to action that Jesus makes here, they are not about the future, they are about the present, today, right here, right now. Blessed ARE the poor in spirit. Blessed ARE the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart. Right here, right now, these people are blessed – not blessed by the

standards of this world, not by the ways that the wealthy and powerful measure blessings. Jesus knows that seeing the world for what it truly is – letting go of all the lies about success that we've been poisoned with, and seeing ourselves and the people around us with clear, unclouded sight, that is a blessing. When we stop pretending, stop participating in our world's obsessive quest for more and more and more, the moment we do that, we are blessed, we are set free, free from fear and anxiety and despair. The expectations and demands and pressures of this world have kept us bound and shackled for so long, and just in that act of choosing to accept the world that Jesus offers us, choosing to live in the kingdom of heaven, choosing to define our lives by the kingdom's standards instead of the world's, through that very decision we are blessed, unimaginably blessed.

We are called to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, to embrace the blessedness of poverty and grief, meekness and mercy, peace and purity and persecution, living as if the kingdom is already here, because Jesus promises us that his kingdom is coming, and it cannot be stopped. All these blessings are blessings for today, but they are also a promise for tomorrow, a promise that all the trouble we see around us will not last forever, it cannot last forever. No matter what human beings try to create to keep our broken world propped up, no matter how good we get at pretending that all of this sin and death and despair is permanent, Jesus promises us that the kingdom of heaven is on its way. Our God is coming to eradicate every trace of evil, every trace of tyranny and cruelty and misery and pain from the face

of this earth, to make everything that is broken whole again, everything that is wounded healed, everything that is dead brought back to life. That world is coming, it is inevitable, it is unstoppable, and when we know that this is true, when we know that Christ's victory has already been won, then why bother living in that dying, defeated world for one more second? Why keep pretending that the powers of this world have any control over us any longer? We have Christ's promise that when we accept the blessedness that he offers us, when we live in his kingdom while we wait for that kingdom to come, we will know his comfort, we will be filled with his righteousness, we will receive his mercy, we will see God, here in our midst, here in our world. We will be called children of God, blessed, beloved, children of God, and nothing can change that. Nothing can take that away. Our God is calling us to stop trying to stay safe, stop trying to keep things normal, and open our eyes to see the kingdom that is on its way, start living like that kingdom is already here. Today, in our lives, may the kingdom come. Today may we be blessed. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.