

**Sermon :: 16-Feb-2025**  
**Epiphany 6, Year C**

“ Blessed are those ... **who** delight in the law of the *LORD* ”

You might not be aware of it ... but we just [**said / sang**] one of the most unique psalms in the Bible.

Virtually every one of the 150 psalms in the psalter ... psalms of praise and psalms of lament ... psalms of yearning and psalms of delight ... are prayers lifted up to *God*. But not *today's* ... not this very *first* psalm. It is one of only two<sup>1</sup> in whole psalter *not* addressed to God. Psalm One, rather, speaks directly to *us*: the reader ... the ***pray-er***. It prepares us to speak to God ... in **all** the many voices and moods that follow ... by *reminding* us that before we start filling God's ears with the content of our hearts ... we must first *tune* those hearts to the ways of *God*: that if we “*delight* in the law of the *Lord*” ... then our lives shall bear fruit, and “everything [we] do shall prosper.” But if we are “wicked” ... if we take the counsel of our own minds, pursue our own agendas and seek to serve only our *own* good ... then our ways are “doomed.” As much as we expect *God* to listen to *our* thoughts in all the psalms that follow ... Psalm One reminds us that *we*, likewise, must be willing to listen to *God's* mind, as well.

Indeed, our other readings for today teach much the same lesson:

- The Lord says, through Jeremiah, “Cursèd are those who trust in mere mortals | and make mere flesh their strength ... [and] blessèd are those who trust in in the LORD.”
- Jesus, in His Sermon on the Plain, basically reiterates this, if a little more abstractly and poetically: “Blessèd are those who are *hungry* now”—who *need* now, who *long* now, who do not—or *cannot*—bend the world to their ways, to satisfy their own desires—“for you will be filled. ... But *woe* to you who are *full* now”—who scrape and claw and bully and menace their way to the top ... piling up all they can for *themselves*, no matter the cost to *others*—“for *you* will be *hungry*.”

The message is clear, Old Testament and New: God delights in<sup>2</sup> the acts of those who actively seek to do God's will ... who *restrain* themselves ... who strive for the *worthiness* of their own deeds and measure their *morality*, *before* undertaking them. In short, we might say: Blessèd are those who wield ***their*** power ... like *God* wields ***God's***.

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Now, we're very accustomed to naming, and even *delighting* in, God's *omnipotence*: God's utterly unfettered power ... as creator and sustainer of the cosmos ... as the Alpha and the Omega ... to accomplish *absolutely anything* God desires. But how often do we pause to consider all that God *doesn't* do? all that God *could* have simply *made* happen ... but has *chosen* not to?

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<sup>1</sup> The other is Ps 2, which scholars think may delineate 1 and 2 an introductory 'unit,' of sorts, intended to set our hearts in the right place to pray to God all that will follow.

<sup>2</sup> And has given—*ultimately*, if not *immediately*—this world into the hands of ...

- God *could* have created us without the ability—the free will—to disobey God ... and made us, instead, a race of obedient, slavish, un-self-conscious automatons  
> But God *chose* to *seek* our love, rather than *program* it into us
- God *could* have destroyed all creation, forever, in the Flood ... or have abrogated God's covenant with Israel after one rebellion too many  
> But God *chose* to **remain in**—to continue to *cultivate*—relationship with God's people, rather than consigning us to the cosmic scrap heap
- God *could* have entered this world in an awesome blaze of glory-and-might that drove the rulers of this world to their knees ... and the long-suffering of this world directly into God's arms ... and not as a helpless, vulnerable infant  
> But God *chose* to descend to and *become* humanity, rather than ride roughshod *over* us
- God *could* have saved this world with a magnanimous wave of a hand or an easy nod of the head ... instead of sacrificing God's *own* self to die an agonizing death on a hideous cross  
> But God *chose* to *show* us the *grace* of placing self *below* others ... and the *mercy* of willingly-undertaken *servanthood* ... in a piteous public act of humility and self-abnegation ... rather than simply *decreeing* a new world order or issuing an *edict*: For an all-powerful God who ... nevertheless ... counts self as *last*, rather than first (or only) ... who *shares* control, rather than hoarding it ... who seeks to be a *conduit*, *through* Whom the *maximum good flows* to the *greatest* many ... rather than a *dam* that traps *all* the 'goods' for *oneself* ... **such a God** is setting the highest example of love ... modeling the widest practice of charity ... exercising the greatest—and most generous—self-restraint ... this world has *ever* known or ever *will* know

For, my friends, God teaches us that **the greatest exercise of great power is greater restraint in wielding it.**

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Sure ... we *can*, if we're so inclined, cut-and-paste ... pick-and-choose ... our reading of the Bible to bask in a false glory<sup>3</sup> of a triumphalist, 'non-nonsense' Jesus Who's "kickin' ass and takin' names": obsessing over the *one* time Jesus overturned tables ... while ignoring the *countless* times He fed and embraced, helped and healed, prayed and wept. Blissfully unburdened **by** and willfully unconcerned **with** the Word of God that is *actually* revealed in *Christ* ... we can invent, from whole cloth, cramped, self-serving understandings of 'God's' desires for this world ... until we somehow—*magically!*—legitimize our *own* stunted notions of 'justice' ... validate our *own* anemic limits of 'compassion' ... privilege our *own* self-serving definitions of 'peace' ... our own self-proclaimed standards of "merit" and "deserving" ... and self-assessed metrics of "genius" and "common sense." Yes, as long as there's been a Bible, there have been those who've convinced themselves that whatever *they're* doing ... whatever *they* stand for ... whatever means *they're* resorting to ... are wholly consonant with the ways of God.

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<sup>3</sup> In truth, an idol.

But as a wise man<sup>4</sup> once taught me ... for us Christians, Jesus *Himself* is our epistemology: *Jesus* makes *visible* ... the *invisible God*. *Jesus* is the way—direct and unmediated—God’s given us, to *know* and *understand* God and God’s ways in this world. *Jesus* is the ‘gold standard,’ if you will, against which we must measure everything else we think—or *want* to believe—about God. How *Jesus* was born ... lived ... spoke ... taught ... treated others ... loved ... wept ... prayed ... obeyed ... endured ... sacrificed ... suffered ... and died ... notwithstanding—and, in fact, *actively laying aside*—God’s omnipotence ... *is* God’s foremost revelation of Godself to us: both for our understanding of *God* ... and for our ordering of the affairs of *this world*.

And what *is* this revelation? At *every single turn* in the gospels, my friends ... *Jesus* shows us that **the greatest exercise of great power is greater restraint in wielding it**. ¶*Nowhere* in the gospels do we find *Jesus* *imposing* His will—however holy—on those around Him ... but only seeking to *draw* them *to* Him, through preaching and teaching, healing and consoling. ¶*Nowhere* in the gospels do we see *Jesus* appropriating for Himself earthly authority that rightfully belongs to others ... but only trying to *persuade* and *convince* them that they’re deploying it unethically or unlovingly. ¶*Nowhere* in the gospels do we experience *Jesus* manipulating the minds and warping the worldviews of others, to achieve His own ends ... but only *inviting* them to believe in Him and *showing* them why they *should*. ¶*And nowhere* in the gospels do we observe *Jesus* *ever* exercising His power for His *own* benefit ... but only to cleanse the leper ... relieve the suffering ... feed the hungry ... raise the dead ... and all—*all*—as He marches—steadily, unhesitatingly and selflessly—to His own ignominious and wholly innocent sacrificial death.

*Jesus’ entire life* ... His every *teaching* ... His every *deed* ... His every *choice* ... His every *prayer*: “not *My* will, but *Thine* be done” (Lk 22:42) ... is the placement of *others* ahead of *self*: *servanthood* ahead of power ... *compassion* ahead of gain ... *mercy* and *embrace* and *lovingkindness* ... ahead of *ruthlessness* and *division* and *spite*. *Jesus* came into this world with divine omnipotence ... with, quite literally, **all ↓ mighty** power<sup>5</sup> ... and yet He reveals to us, over and over again ... from lowly Manger to heinous Cross to silent Ascension<sup>6</sup> ... that **the greatest exercise of great power is greater restraint in wielding it**.

For people’s true *respect* for ... their genuine *embrace* of ... their free and uncoerced willingness to *follow* ... great power ... is born of the lightness of its touch, the selflessness of its motivations and the benevolence of its ends. And their *love* of one who *wields* great power ... is born of the love he ... **like Christ** ... *first* ↓ shows *them*.

THE REV DOUGLAS S WORTHINGTON  
All Souls’ Episcopal Church  
San Diego, CA

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<sup>4</sup> The Very Rev Ian Markham, dean of Virginia Theological Seminary.

<sup>5</sup> See Philippians 2:6-8.

<sup>6</sup> *I.e.*, His willing withdrawal from this world at the zenith of His regard, rather than remaining here a hero, to leverage the Resurrection in any worldly way.