

Epiphany 6, Year C  
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Saint James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

The universe just keeps getting stranger and stranger.  
A few weeks ago, you may recall reading or seeing on the news  
stories about Ultima Thule  
when NASA's New Horizons spacecraft whizzed by it.  
Ultima Thule is the most distant object ever to be approached by a spacecraft.  
It lies some 4 billion miles from the sun,  
way out there beyond Pluto,  
and it's really tiny,  
only about 20 miles long and 10 miles wide.

When scientists got the first glimpses of this object  
taken by the New Horizons cameras,  
they initially concluded that it looked kind of like a snowman.  
It looked like two round snowballs, stuck together.

But now they're revising that description.  
As more data comes in from the flyby,  
now they can see that instead of a snowman,  
Ultima Thule is more like a pancake stuck to a walnut.

Alan Stern, the principle investigator, told NPR  
that seeing the new data has significantly changed scientists' views.  
"But more importantly," he says, "the new images  
are creating scientific puzzles  
about how such an object could even be formed.  
We've never seen something like this orbiting the sun," he said.

In other words, there is absolutely nothing in our world  
that looks anything like this,  
and given the rules of physics that we operate with,  
it should not exist.  
And yet it does.  
Go figure.

I was thinking of Ultima Thule this week  
 as I was studying our Gospel lesson  
 and wondering what on earth to say about it.  
 Because this world that Jesus is describing,  
 where people are blessed if they're poor or hungry  
 or hated and excluded,  
 yet they are in big trouble if they're rich or full  
 or laughing or respected by others ...  
 Those aren't the rules we operate with either.  
 This world Jesus is speaking of simply cannot exist.  
 Or can it?

You know, if there is a single central theme  
 for this season of Epiphany,  
 which we're now in the sixth week of,  
 that theme would be light.  
 Epiphany begins with the light of the star leading the Wise Men.  
 And it ends with the shining radiance of Jesus' garments at the  
 Transfiguration.  
 In between, this image of light informs many of the readings  
 throughout the season.

Luke's telling of the blessings and woes,  
 which we just heard,  
 fits right in with this.  
 It's purpose is to  
 shed some new light on an old subject.  
 He is enlightening his disciples,  
 and by extension he's enlightening us today.  
 But in order to discover what's going on,  
 we need to know what that old subject is.  
 Without that, it's easy to misunderstand what Jesus is talking about.

For example, it's easy to imagine that these beatitudes are about us;  
 that they are commands for how we should live,  
 and what we should do.  
 So we imagine that Jesus is telling us,  
 'go out there and be poor', and 'cry more'  
 and 'do something so you can be persecuted.'

Well, if that's what Jesus is up to,  
 he's pretty much wasting his time.  
 Because all advice like that does  
 is make us feel frustrated and guilty,  
 and we're just not gonna do it.  
 What would be the point, really?

But, you see, these Beatitudes aren't about us.  
 They're really not a set of instructions on how we should live.  
 Jesus really doesn't want to see everybody going around weeping,  
 and being the objects of ridicule.

Some have suggested that these statements of Jesus  
 aren't meant for us as individuals,  
 but for our world collectively.  
 It's been suggested that if we would only be spiritually poor  
 or spiritually hungry,  
 this will bring out the best in others,  
 and eventually the whole world will end up being a better,  
 kinder, nicer place.

Unfortunately, that's just plain silly.  
 You and I all know how much the world respects  
 and responds kindly  
 to the sort of behavior found in the Beatitudes.  
 Things don't work like that.  
 You turn the other cheek,  
 you're likely to wind up with two sore cheeks.  
 Being poor just means you're likely to be shut out  
 of health care and housing and a good education.

That's the way it is,  
 that's the way it always was,  
 and Jesus was no fool.  
 He was not trying to shine any light  
 on how anything in this world works.  
 As far as this world is concerned  
 the Beatitudes don't make any sense at all.

Still, the beatitudes do shine light,

but they really don't shine any light about the way the our world works.  
 They are not about our world.  
 The beatitudes are about God,  
 they are about who God is, and who God blesses,  
 and what the kingdom of God is like.  
 They tell us what matters to God,  
 they tell us who is especially important to God,  
 and they tell us what God pays attention to.

Jesus gives us this amazing glimpse into the nature of God,  
 hoping, no doubt, that such knowledge  
 may have a valuable effect on us.  
 But that is up to us.  
 Jesus offers us his picture of God's values and God's priorities;  
 and he offers them as an alternative  
 to the vision of life we usually carry around with us.  
 We can only act on what we can see;  
 and Jesus is giving us the chance to see farther,  
 and clearer,  
 and deeper than ever before.  
 Just like the New Horizons spacecraft  
 let us see into the universe farther than ever.  
 What we do with what we see there  
 is entirely up to us.

If we can see, really see,  
 whom God considers blessed,  
 or happy,  
 then we will at least know the road to blessedness and happiness,  
 and maybe be able to use that knowledge.

Jesus tells us that the world's insignificant players,  
 the losers,  
 are blessed by God.  
 He tells us this so we can know a little better who God is.  
 He tells us this to give us a bit more light so we can see a little better.

So the question now becomes:  
 If God is really like this,  
 if God really does give preference to the poor

and the hungry and the hated;  
 what could that mean?  
 Which poor and hungry and hated groups  
 might we respectable Episcopalians,  
 who are not poor, and not hungry,  
 be advised to open ourselves up to  
 and learn from  
 and take notice of,  
 even if we do not wish to be like them ourselves?

How could our lives be different?  
 How could our church be different?  
 How could our country be different?  
 That's the issue here,  
 and that's the question Jesus leaves us with.  
 What do we do when we are confronted with truths  
 that are counter to everything we thought we knew?

Thule was a mythical, far northern island  
 in medieval literature.  
 Thus the phrase "ultima Thule"  
 means "beyond the borders of the known world."

That's what we have seen.  
 We have seen beyond the borders of our world  
 and been given a glimpse into the mind of God.  
 God can make a pancake-y walnut-y thing  
 that all our science tells us ought not to exist,  
 and God can put a picture of it in our world.

What can God do with your life  
 that also seems impossible ...  
 until it's not?

Amen.