

Jesus gives his initial sermon (Matthew 5:1-2)

## **The preacher is still green! Maybe we'll hear something hopeful.**

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In some Christian traditions, the beginning of one's work as a licensed or ordained minister is marked by their "initial sermon." For many licentiates and ministers, it is the first time they've ever preached. It is, to say the least, a big deal. Some preachers will send out invitations to family, friends, and colleagues. The initial sermon is understood to set the tone for one's ministry, so it is taken very seriously. The preacher feels pressure to be poignant and to do well on their first try.

This is not the first time they've done ministry. They've probably taught Bible study or Sunday school, visited ailing members, organized events, or served in various other capacities to share the love of God and the good news of Christ. This is, however, the first time they've proclaimed God's word in this manner. So the hearer is eager to experience this person's gifts (however nascent) for perhaps the first time.

The Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the Beatitudes, reads much like the highly anticipated initial sermon of a well-respected and gifted minister. After Jesus has spent time gathering students and healing the sick, he climbs the mount and preaches to a crowd excited to hear from him. It is the first time in Matthew's Gospel that we "hear" Jesus preach. As one who has been present for colleagues' initial sermons, I can say that the hearer enters that moment with a great deal of hopefulness. You settle in for something fresh and new. And because the preacher is

still green, there's a good chance you'll hear a hopeful message.

Because it is the first time Matthew allows us to hear from Jesus, the Beatitudes are the perfect place to start. They are poignant and--unlike many initial sermons--succinct statements about the heart of God toward people. They cover a number of bases--the poor, the meek, the mourner, the peacemaker--all categories in which I assume the majority of the crowd could place themselves. Jesus speaks to them and calls them blessed. In the midst of their challenges and the opposition they face, he calls them blessed. What a hopeful thing to hear!

In uncertain, tumultuous, and often frightening times, I pray we can lean into hope. I pray that we can have the audacity to believe we are yet blessed even as our circumstances suggest otherwise. I pray that the peacemakers, who find their plates especially full right now, would go forward in confidence having been assured that they are blessed.