

February 16, Epiphany 6C (Luke 6:17–26)

I want to be surprised by God, even if that surprise might scare the bejesus out of me.

by [Ed Horstmann](#) in the [February 2025](#) issue

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Somewhere along the line, I started to conclude my email messages with the word *blessings*. Why not? It has biblical roots, and in this age of grievance it carries a contrarian ring of affirmation. But it also sounds vague—and not nearly as challenging as the blessings that God confers on biblical characters from Abram and Sarai all the way to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Those blessings are specific, unsettling, and demanding. My one-word send-off says something without really saying much of anything at all.

In his book *Desert Solitaire*, Edward Abbey crafts words of blessing that are pointed and breathtaking: “May your trails be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing view. May your mountains rise into and above the clouds. May your rivers flow without end, meandering through pastoral valleys tinkling with bells . . . where something strange and more beautiful and more full of wonder than your deepest dreams waits for you—beyond that next turning of the canyon walls.”

While part of me feels daunted by Abbey’s summons to adventure, there is a deeper part of me that wants what he wants: to keep my eyes open for something strange, beautiful, and more full of wonder. I want to be surprised by God, even if that surprise might scare the bejesus out of me.

When Jesus uses the word *blessed* in this Sunday’s collection of sayings from Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, he too is specific and challenging. His blessings exalt God’s value system. They recognize human suffering. They do not accept hunger as an inevitable consequence of living in a Roman-occupied country. Instead, they promise a day when hungry people will eat their fill.

He uses blessings to congratulate people whose actions in his name have earned them hatred. I once received several threatening letters after the church I served voted to become an LGBTQ-affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ. When I showed those letters to a member of my congregation, he smiled and said, "Those are for framing." *Blessed are you when people hate you on account of the Son of man.*

Jesus pairs his blessings with woes to describe what life looks like when we're not blessed. Scholars like to point out that these woes make Luke's version of the beatitudes much tougher than the version in Matthew's Gospel. Do you *think*? "Woe to you who are rich. . . . Woe to you who are full now. . . . Woe to you who are laughing now. . . . Woe to all who speak well of you." Can we relate? If so, woe is us.

These blessings and woes are certainly strange, but could they be the doorway to a life more beautiful and more full of wonder than our deepest dreams? This depends on the choices we make. And Luke uses his gospel to show that people can fall under the spell of the Jesus Way and choose the winding and dangerous path toward participation in God's blessed kingdom. The good Samaritan provides emergency assistance to a man who has been robbed and then generously commits funds for his longer-term recovery. Following an encounter with Jesus, a tax collector named Zacchaeus distributes his wealth to those he has cheated. An unnamed woman breaks a precious jar of ointment so that she can use its contents as a blessing for Jesus as life brings him closer to the cross.

Jesus uses blessings to encourage and give hope to those who have every good reason to be discouraged and hopeless. Underneath these words, he is saying, *You are beloved. The world may not see you that way, but I do. And I will treat you accordingly.* Where is the church speaking words that communicate that kind of hope? Where is the church acting to make these blessings come true? That's the winding path of love that leads to the most amazing views.

Jesus cared so much for those who needed care that he held nothing back as he loved them. As Luke says, "Power came out from him and healed all of them." He must have seemed strange and more beautiful and more full of wonder than their deepest dreams. His spirit of compassion for those who were impoverished and ostracized was fierce and unwavering. He was not beyond using warnings and shock value to issue a wake-up call to those who had the means to make life more blessed for those without such resources.

Jesus' blessings and woes are specific and daunting. They can make us reconsider how we have ordered and understood our world—and how to amplify compassion and generosity. That would be the first step along the winding, dangerous road that leads to a world full of compassion.