

# Mountaintop Wisdom

February 1, 2026

Micah 6:1-8

Matthew 5:1-12

“Plead your case before the mountains,” wrote Micah some 750 years before Jesus was born, “and let the hills hear your voice.” He wrote about an imagined court in which God and God’s people each tried to make the case that they had kept the covenant, and that the other had broken it. The role of the mountains? They were summoned as judges.

It was Micah’s poetic way of inviting the people of Jerusalem, particularly the wealthiest and most powerful, to consider what God might think of the things they were doing. The prosecution’s opening statement really gets rolling in verses nine and following. “Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights?” Apparently merchants were defrauding their customers. “Your wealthy are full of violence; your inhabitants speak lies with tongues of deceit in their mouths.”

I grant you that we’re only getting one side of the case, but it doesn’t sound that hard for the mountains to judge, does it?

The covenant had been first delivered to the people on a mountain. The Temple in Jerusalem, where the people hoped their devotions would excuse their violence and fraud, stood on a mountaintop. God had set high standards from a high place. They didn’t seem to be playing out as intended down in the valleys.

Almost eight centuries later, as Matthew told it, Jesus ascended a mountain to speak to a gathering crowd who wanted to hear him. We’ve grown to call it “The Sermon on the Mount.” Its placement in the Gospel reflects Matthew’s belief that the best way to show that Jesus was the Messiah was to pay attention to what he said. Jesus’ words tell us who he was and who he is.

The first thing he did was to tell his listeners who they were. They were blessed.

As Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, “You are blessed. You have to hear that on the front end. And note that being blessed is not just for the sake of potential joy, but also for the sake of making it through that which will be difficult. Again, these are Jesus’ first words to his disciples. We need to hear in each and every one of the Beatitudes what’s at stake for Jesus and for his ministry.”

You see, this is another mountaintop moment in the Scriptures. It has a pretty close relationship to the gift of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It has its precursory echoes in Micah's summons of the mountains to judge the people. It's mountaintop wisdom, and the tragedy of mountaintop wisdom is just how often it stays on the mountain and doesn't make it down into the valleys.

As Lance Pape writes at Working Preacher, "But if the Beatitudes are a description of reality, what world do they describe? Certainly not our own. 'Blessed are the meek' (verse 5), says Jesus, but in our world the meek don't get the land, they get left holding the worthless beads. 'Blessed are the merciful' (verse 7), says Jesus, but in our world mourning may be tolerated for a while, but soon we will ask you to pull yourself together and move on. 'Blessed are the pure in heart' (verse 8), says Jesus, but in our world such people are dismissed as hopelessly naïve."

I think Dr. Pape has his finger on it: "hopelessly naïve." Isn't that what we hear when we assert the Beatitudes as truths? They reflect a better world, but we don't actually live that way. Some say we can't actually live that way. For instance, Stephen Miller, Deputy White House Chief of Staff, who told CNN interviewer Jake Tapper "We live in a world in which you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else, but we live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power... These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

That's the valley. If you can forgive a Biblical reference in a sermon, that's the valley of the shadow of death.

Is that where we want to live?

It's where a lot of people have lived over the course of history. The Hebrew people lived in it when they were slaves in Egypt, when their nations were overrun by the empires of Assyria and Babylon, and when they were occupied by Rome in Jesus' day. The feudal systems of Europe, Japan, and India left a lot of people in the valley of death. As Osvaldo Vena observes at Working Preacher, "Grief comes for all of us, but mortality rates were higher in the ancient world. Parents simply could not expect their children to survive infancy, let alone make it to adulthood. It was not a given. War, food and housing insecurity, and infectious diseases could cut a life short." In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the aftermath of truly catastrophic world wars, nations and non-governmental actors strove to bring food, farming assistance, vaccination, and stable health care delivery to places on the earth that had lost child after child to the grinding effects of being poor. In 2010 I heard a United Nations official tell a UCC gathering that the end goal of these efforts was not far off. He could imagine an end to extreme poverty.

The mountaintop wisdom was in sight from the valley.

Mr. Miller and his ilk would drive it away, out of sight, obscured by clouds high on the mountain.

We need to bring mountaintop wisdom to the valley.

As Debie Thomas writes at [JourneyWithJesus.net](http://JourneyWithJesus.net), "Jesus acts. He doesn't simply speak blessing. He lives it. He embodies it. He incarnates it..."

"This is the vocation we are called to. The work of the kingdom — the work of sharing the blessings we enjoy — is not the work of a fuzzy, distant someday. It is the work — and the joy — of the here and now. The Beatitudes remind us that blessing and justice are inextricably linked. If it's blessing we want, then it's justice we must pursue."

Mountaintop wisdom.

Let's bring it to the valley of death.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*