

Vision Beautiful

Today we begin a five-week exploration of a collection of Jesus' sayings known as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' radical vision of what God's reign on earth might look like is a vision of wholeness for all people. Paul reminds us that God's wisdom is different from worldly wisdom. Micah and the psalmist describe ways to live this vision beautiful.

Focus Scripture: Matthew 5:1–12

After Jesus' baptism, he calls a group of disciples. They travel throughout Galilee teaching and healing, sharing the good news that God's realm is breaking into the world. It is a message that the gospel writer's own community desperately needs to hear. Matthew is written to a group of new Christians after disaster has happened. The temple has been destroyed, the people scattered. Jesus is no longer present in the flesh. What laws will govern the community now? What will the new community look like? What is the good news for those trying to be faithful in a hostile world?

Of the four gospels, Matthew most wants to show that Jesus fulfills Israel's experience. In this gospel, Jesus is shown as the new Moses, teaching from the mountain as Moses did when he gave Israel the law. The gospel writer arranges Jesus' words in five blocks of teaching, reminding readers of the "five books of Moses." Chapters 5 to 7 – the Sermon on the Mount – form the first block.

The Beatitudes begin the Sermon on the Mount. They are a series of sentences beginning with the word *blessed*, or *happy* in some translations. Blessing is God's free gift to humankind, a sign of covenant relationship with God. Such blessing may look very different from the world's idea of happiness. In these sayings, Jesus turns human notions of happiness upside down. What kind of living brings God's blessing? Jesus teaches that the blessed ones are those who are humble of heart ("poor in spirit"), who are gentle, who show mercy, who hunger and thirst for God's ways. Those who mourn will be comforted; those who make peace will be called God's children. Those who are persecuted in the cause of justice will find themselves part of God's transforming reality.

There is urgency in Jesus' teaching. He uses the present tense – this is happening right now. In Jesus' coming, God's love is revealed and made manifest. This teaching is directed to the disciples, the Twelve and the larger group of men and women who accompany Jesus. The Beatitudes describe the way of life for those who commit themselves to follow. For Matthew's community, this vision beautiful is what life should be like.

Living in right relationship with God and neighbour brings blessing – calling out the best in us and others. The other readings spell out this vision of wholeness. **Micah 6:1–8** describes a dramatic confrontation, a lawsuit between God and Israel. What must Israel do to be in a right relationship with God? Verse 8 summarizes: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. **Psalms 15** gives a similar response. The psalmist asks who may come before God in the temple. It is those who do what is right, speak the truth, and do no evil to their neighbours.

In **1 Corinthians 1:18–31**, Paul echoes Matthew's theme of worldly values turned upside down. God's wisdom seems like foolishness to the present age. God overturns the established order. God chooses us to play our part in God's plan. In Christ we are strengthened to bring about God's reign of justice and peace.

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Our experience today is, in many ways, similar to that of Matthew's community. We may not be persecuted for our faith, but the ways of faith often seem foolish compared with the values of society. In what ways do the gospel values challenge contemporary views – turn them upside down? What challenges do you find in trying to live according to the standards expressed in today's readings?



January 30, 2011

Focus Scripture
Matthew 5:1–12

Additional Scriptures
Micah 6:1–8
Psalms 15
1 Corinthians 1:18–31

O God, you turn things upside down, calling the wise to embrace your folly. Help us to grow in acknowledging our need for you. Open us to the vision of your reign on earth, and strengthen us to do our part. Amen.

Check out Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Spirit Sighting are posted weekly prior to the date of use.

The Focus for Ages 3–5

Children will have heard the word “blessing” but are not likely to know what it means. Part of the role of the teacher is to help the children understand that they are a blessing simply in being who they are. Leaders can also assist children in making the connections between acts of caring and being a blessing. As children hear the story based on the scripture, they will hear that being a blessing will not change based on whether they are happy or sad. In God’s eyes, these children are always a blessing. In

Priscilla’s eyes they are a blessing in the form of a gift. What kind of a gift? A gift of God’s joy in the world. In God’s eyes the children are always a gift-blessing. When we think of the children as gift-blessings, it shapes our relationship with them. Children are very sensitive to changes in the ways that they are perceived by grownups. Knowing that God’s perception of them is unconditional helps to create a sense of trust and safety. Pray for each child by name, that she or he might find a place of rest in God’s expansive love.

January 30, 2011



Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week’s focus scripture, Matthew 5:1–12, and biblical background material on page 59.
- ❑ Gather items for the worship area: *green cloth*, *Bible*, *pillar candle*, *candlesnuffer*, *matches*, and *offering basket*.
- ❑ Make a *bookmark* and print “Stories of Jesus” on it. Place the bookmark in the gospel of Matthew.
- ❑ Bring *basic supply kit* (see “Supplies and Recipes” p. 96), *song sheet* (see “Additional Songs” p. 95), and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 9, Seasons Growing Faith Songbook* and *Seasons Growing Faith Music CD*, and *CD player*. Seasons .mp3 Downloads are available for purchase at www.seasonsonline.ca.
- ❑ Prepare a *crowd stand-up prop* for each child. (See “Story Props” p. 99.) Place the props around the room before session.
- ❑ Bring *Jesus #2 figure* from poster *Storytelling Resources*.
- ❑ Bring a sheet of *newspaper* and a square of *green fabric* (approximately 50 cm/20 in x 50 cm/20 in) for a “story stage.”

Gather

- ❑ Bring *Priscilla, the puppet* (see “This Season, So” on p. 2).

Engage

- ❑ Bring a *copy of today’s resource sheet “God’s Special Dream – Part 1.”*

Respond

Choose from the options provided. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Blessing bracelets:** *crayons with paper wrappings removed, long envelopes*. Seal envelopes before session.
- ❑ **Blessing pennants:** *copies of today’s resource sheet, “Blessing Pennant,” heavy paper, straws, decorative materials* (such as foam shapes, self-adhesive stickers, glitter) and *joyful music* (such as “Cosmic Hymn of Praise” [p. 5, also #1 on *Seasons Music CD*].) Follow instructions on resource sheet to prepare the pennants before session.
- ❑ **Message in a bottle:** *clear plastic bottles with screw top lids (clean and dry), plain paper*

The Age 3 Supplement will have week-by-week resources which you can use to adapt sessions if you are leading a group consisting mostly of three-year-olds.



Vision Beautiful

Scripture

Matthew 5:1–12

FOCUS To affirm that we are a blessing.

GATHER

Greet children by name and encourage them to greet one another. Invite the children to assist you in setting up the worship table. As you place the green cloth on the table, mention that this is the special colour for the Season after the Epiphany. Mention that the Season after the Epiphany is a shining time when we hear stories about how God's love shines and sparkles in the world.

Opening ritual

Gather around the worship table. Encourage children to repeat your actions and words. Point at yourself and say,

"I am here." (*Children repeat.*)

Point at everyone in the circle and say,

"You are here." (*Children repeat.*)

Extend arms and say,

"God is here." (*Children repeat.*)

Join hands and say,

"Let's sing and pray." (*Children repeat.*)

Light the candle. Invite children to join with you in singing the following song:

Sing "Light the Candle" (See "Additional Songs" p. 95)

Receive the children's offering, and pray the following prayer:

Pray Dear God,
thank you for being with us everyday.
Thank you for showing us love in so many ways. Amen.

Extinguish the candle to symbolize that the opening ritual has ended.

Priscilla, the puppet, introduces the theme
Sing Priscilla's song (see "Additional Songs" p. 95) and welcome her.

Priscilla: Hi, (*Priscilla names each person.*)

Teacher: How are you?

Priscilla: I'm fine, but I have been wondering about something.

Teacher: What have you been wondering about?

Priscilla: I was told that I am a "blessing." What does that mean? Can you tell me?

Teacher: Absolutely! First of all, let's think of times when someone you love gave you a big smile or a big hug. (*Encourage responses.*) That was a blessing. Now think of times when you made someone feel happy or welcomed or cared for? (*Encourage responses.*) That was a blessing, too. Have any of you felt happy when you saw a beautiful rainbow or watched how the stars twinkle at night? That was a blessing, too. A blessing is a gift of God's joy in the world.

Priscilla: So, does that mean that I am a gift of God's joy in the world?

Teacher: Yes, it does. And the same is true for everyone in this room. Thank you, Priscilla, for helping us learn about this word today. (*Say goodbye to Priscilla or place her nearby.*)

If not using Priscilla, the puppet, talk about how they feel when... they see a beautiful rainbow; someone they love gives them a hug; they have made someone else feel cared for. Follow up by saying that these moments are "blessings." A "blessing" is a gift of God's joy in the world.

2 ENGAGE

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship table. Say, "What's in the Bible? Let's take a look." Use the special bookmark to open it to the gospel of Matthew. Finish the poem by including the words written on the bookmark. (i.e. "Stories of Jesus. That's what's in the book.") Use resource sheet "God's Special Dream – Part 1" to tell the story.

After the story

Sing "I Am Amazing" (p. 11 in *Seasons Growing Faith Songbook*, #7 in *Seasons Growing Faith Music CD*). (Substitute the word "blessing" for "amazing.")

Or

Sing "The Blessing Song" (see "Additional Songs" p. 95).

Game Stand in a circle. Ask who would like to be first. Then, lead the following chant with that child's name included, and have the children repeat each line after you say it:

(Child's name) is a blessing,

today and every day!

We give thanks for *(Child's name)*,
today and every day!

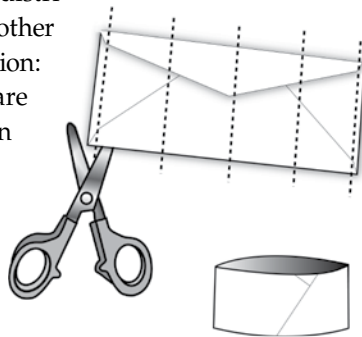
Repeat the chant with each child having a turn to be in the middle.

3

RESPOND

Choose from the following activities.

- ❑ **Blessing bracelets** Some people in the church community (such as people who fold bulletins, tidy the sanctuary...) are rarely thanked. Invite children to share the blessings they have received by giving these people a blessing. Distribute a sealed envelope to each child. Encourage them to use the sides of crayons to colour both sides of the envelopes. Then cut off both ends of the envelopes and discard. Cut up the rest of the envelopes into wide strips, cutting from one folded edge to the other. The strips will open up into bracelets. Invite each child to wear a bracelet. If possible, involve the children in the distribution of the other bracelets. (Option: print "You are a blessing" on each bracelet that is given away.)



- ❑ **Blessing pennants** We are all a blessing! Follow instructions on resource sheet "Blessing Pennant" and help children create their own pennants. Play music (such as "Cosmic Hymn of Praise" [p. 5, also #1 in *Seasons Music CD*]). and invite children to parade around the room. Each time they hear "praise God," in the song they wave their pennants. (Option: if song is not available, play other joyful music.)
- ❑ **Message in a bottle** We are God's blessings in the world. Let's tell each other! Explain that sometimes people send messages in bottles. Distribute prepared papers and read the message "You are a blessing." Encourage children to draw special pictures or designs that will be taken home by someone else as a special gift. When pictures are completed, roll them to fit into the bottles. Help children screw the lids on and look at pictures through the bottles. If children agree, swap bottles so they take home a message from someone else.



4

BLESS

Gather around the worship table. Carefully light the candle.

Pray Dear God,
we give thanks for Jesus
because he is our friend.
Amen.

Extinguish the candle.

Send each child off with this blessing, "*(Child's name)*, each and every day, you are God's blessing in the world."

REFLECT

What activities helped children begin to understand the significance of Jesus' teachings? What did you learn about the children from their questions and comments today? How will you use these observations to assist you in future sessions?

Planning ahead: Bring "story stage," figure of Jesus #2, and "crowd stand-up props" next week.



Story Tip

By referring to the created scene as much as possible through your actions, you will help bring the scene to life.

God's Special Dream – Part 1

(based on Matthew 5:1–12)

(Create the scene for this story while the children watch: crumple a sheet of newspaper, place it on the floor and drape a piece of fabric over it to represent a hill. Depress the middle of the "hill" slightly and place the story figure of Jesus #2 on top. Invite each child to find a "crowd stand-up prop" in the room and place it around the "hill." Now these people will hear Jesus' story too.)

It was a bright, sunny day. Jesus smiled as he looked around at all his friends. Jesus had invited them to come with him to the top of a tall hill. It was Jesus' favourite place, because you could see so much when you looked around. Besides, it was a good place for sharing stories and talking about things that really mattered. Today, Jesus wanted to help everyone get to know God better.

Jesus took a deep breath of the fresh air, and then began to talk with his friends. "Today, I want to tell you about God's special dream for us. It is a big dream, and God is so glad that we are part of it."

"First, I want to tell you that when God looks at you, God sees a blessing." *(Each time you repeat "When you...", point to one of the children's paper figures around the hill.)*

When you feel sad, God sees you as a blessing.
When you feel like you don't matter, God sees you as a blessing.

When you try to do what your heart tells you is right, God sees you as a blessing.

When you try to be kind to others, God sees you as a blessing.

When others are mean to you, God sees you as a blessing.

No matter what happens, God looks at you and sees a blessing.

Jesus looked around at all the friends. They were smiling. Jesus had so much more to tell them about God's special dream. And Jesus was glad that they understood that they were all blessings.

Ask the children to stand and repeat the following chant with actions to end the story:

Jesus knows us. *(Children point at themselves.)*

Jesus loves us. *(Place hands at heart level.)*

Jesus helps us live and grow! *(Reach up with hands and stand on tiptoes.)*

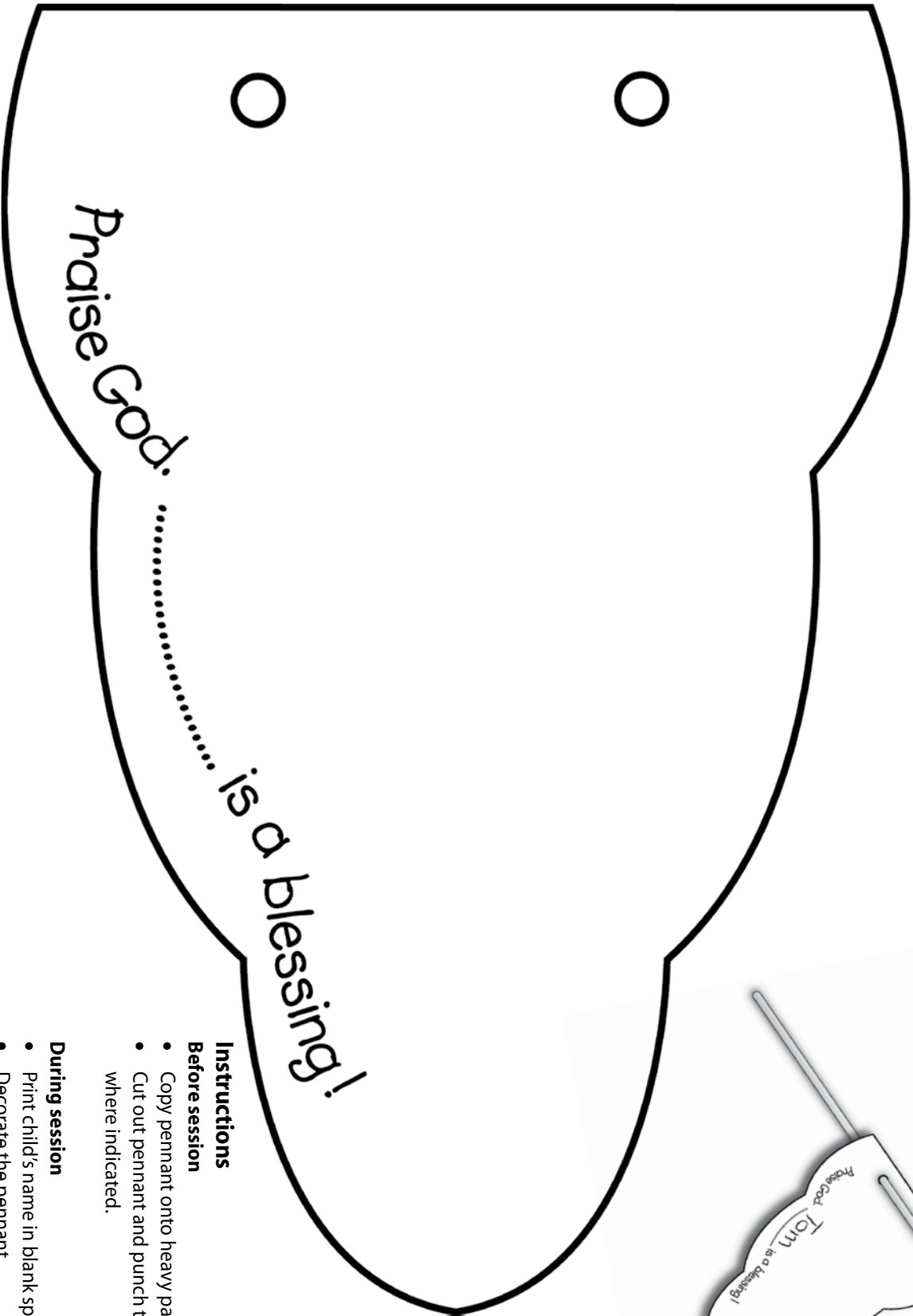
Jesus knows us. *(Children point at themselves.)*

Jesus loves us. *(Place hands at heart level.)*

Now this love we'll show! *(Open arms out wide as if reaching.)*



Blessing Pennant



Instructions

Before session

- Copy pennant onto heavy paper.
- Cut out pennant and punch two holes where indicated.

During session

- Print child's name in blank space.
- Decorate the pennant.
- Thread a straw through the holes and tape in place.