

NOVEMBER 22ND SERMON---PEACE SUNDAY

SERMON TITLE: "A TIME TO REFLECT?"

God says, "I myself." Jesus equates himself with the least of these. Paul tells the Christians of Ephesus, "I have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ and your love toward all the saints." God will gather and feed, bind up and strengthen. Jesus will judge the nations based on their feeding and binding of the most vulnerable and weakest. The intimacy and immediacy of the Most High God contradicts so much of what we imagine to be power and status. Are not the powerful of this world often immune to the suffering of others? Able to insulate themselves from those who are hungry and hurting on the streets? How is it, then, that we mark Christ the King Sunday, with stories of tending to weakness rather than displays of victory?

We have reached that day in the liturgical calendar when we turn from "Ordinary Time" to the cusp of the new year of Advent. The steady growth of that season of green paraments gets replaced for one week to white before we put the anticipatory royal purple on the pulpits and communion tables. This Sunday is the day to remember in all seasons: Jesus is Lord of all. But his rule is marked not by might but by tenderness, not with status but with service, not with control but with compassion. The antithesis to our worldly ways and desires is stark, perhaps especially now in the wake of such a contentious election season.

Humility, Kindness, Healing, Feeding, Tending, Visiting, Justice. These are the markers of the reign of God. These are the traits we exhibit in the world when we follow Jesus. And yet, the sheep and goats of Matthew 25 seem utterly oblivious to the impact and

consequences of their actions or lack thereof. God's intimate and immediate presence is met with a complete lack of recognition on our part. I am not sure what to do with this realization. There seems no point in admonishing people if they are unconscious. It seems the difference between being welcomed into God's kingdom or being cast into the deep darkness is determined largely without our ability to judge for ourselves in which direction we are headed. Is this comforting? Terrifying? Both?

Perhaps the rather low Sunday on the list of liturgical high and holy days offers us a time to pause and be awakened to what is all too often our thoughtless ways of being in this world. We go on autopilot through life and if we are not nudged or pushed to pay attention to not only our actions but the presence of those around us, we may very well end up being shocked at where Jesus puts us when he comes to judge the nations.

These texts remind us that God is not too far off and disinterested in the nations and their inhabitants, but rather active and working for wholeness. Jesus not only judges at some far-off culmination of time, but is present in the people we see. The kingdom of God is very near to us, even if we are very far off from noticing it. Christ the King Sunday calls us to remember that God is present and at work and we will act in accord with God's character and will if we acknowledge this truth. If we acknowledge this truth daily and shape our lives accordingly, perhaps, eventually we will act unthinkingly and automatically out of this truth. Is that the difference between the sheep and the goats? Does one group live unconsciously out of their belief that God rules the world, and the other unconsciously out of their belief in earthly powers?

Walter Bruggemann in his book: Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination, argues that preachers and teachers of the faith are called upon to construct "an evangelical

infrastructure that makes a different communal life possible." He adds "I assume...that the stuff of an evangelical infrastructure is the text of the Bible....I want to insist that, taken as badly as possible on its own, terms, the Bible does indeed radically reconstrue and recontextualize reality."

Evangelical, to Bruggeman, is defined as "Good News," the gospel.

He argues that we need more than biblical literacy---we need biblical imagination, a gospel way of seeing, hoping, responding to our current cultural context or, "if this evangelical infrastucture is not carefully constructed, the Christian congregaton will rely on the dominant infrastructure of consumerism, and will not ever discern until very late (too late) that the infrastructure of consumerism contains little good news.

In other words, if we who follow Jesus are not intentional about who rules our lives and what story is authoritative for us, we will capitulate to the loudest dominant narrative being broadcast all around us, unconsciously even. We will come to that time when Christ the King judges the nations and be bitterly shocked that we missed Jesus in our midst and thus failed to tend him.

As we prepare to turn toward Advent, that time of preparing begins, this week offers us the hopeful reminder that God is near right now. God cares about the hungry and lost, the oppressed and vulnerable, so much so that Jesus is not just beside them, but is embodied in them. Imagine we became awakened to this ever-present presence of God every single day. Imagine if we considered how we might build an evangelical infrastructure, be God's buildings, wherever we went. What if we began and ended our days conscious that we follow Jesus, that our ultimate loyalty is to God, that all other powers are penultimate and that God's power is made known in weakness? I wonder what decisions we would make as a result?

How would we view ourselves and others? What would our actions display to the world? We might begin, unknowingly even, to see Jesus in everyone and respond to them accordingly.

Amen and Amen!