

The Last Sunday of the Church Year (Christ the King)

Service of Daily Prayer -- Morning

November 22, 2020

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: **Amen.**

P: In the morning, O Lord, You hear my voice;

C: **In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for You and watch.**

Psalm 5:3

P: My mouth is filled with Your praise,

C: **and with Your glory all the day.**

Psalm 71:8

P: O Lord, open my lips,

C: **and my mouth will declare Your praise.**

Psalm 51:15

**All: Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

Scripture Readings

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the Lord; I have spoken.

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.

Matthew 25:31-46

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Hymn: LSB 621, *Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence*



1 Let all mor - tal flesh keep si - lence And with fear and
2 King of kings yet born of Mar - y, As of old on
3 Rank on rank the host of heav - en Spreads its van - guard
4 At His feet the six - winged ser - aph, Cher - u - bim with



trem - bling stand; Pon - der noth - ing earth - ly - mind - ed,
earth He stood, Lord of lords in hu - man ves - ture,
on the way As the Light of Light, de - scend - ing
sleep - less eye, Veil their fac - es to the pres - ence



For with bless - ing in His hand Christ our God to earth de -
In the bod - y and the blood, He will give to all the
From the realms of end - less day, Comes the pow'rs of hell to
As with cease - less voice they cry: “Al - le - lu - ia, al - le -



scend - ing Comes our hom - age to de - mand.
faith - ful His own self for heav'n - ly food.
van - quish As the dark - ness clears a - way.
lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia, Lord Most High!”

Sermon

The difference between the first coming and second coming of Christ to our world is so great that we can scarcely begin to take it in. The first time, it was as no one then expected: born in

humanity, laid in a manger, a poor, humble, ordinary man in an unimportant town. That's how most people saw him, even as he demonstrated and declared himself to be far more. But according to what he told us, the second time, which has not yet happened, will be the exact polar opposite: from today's reading, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne."

The first time, many doubted that he was anything special, much less that he was God. When he returns, there will be no doubt at all. Everyone will know who he is, and it will be impossible to deny. On the last day, he'll finally appear the way that many expected the first time, no questions of who he is or why he's there. As Paul writes in Philippians, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

Some will confess it in joy; others will confess it in fear and dread. Some will be like the sheep, and some like the goats, as he puts it in this teaching. We've had two parables the last two weeks leading up to this, all looking forward to the same event. Now, it's not a parable anymore, but a much clearer statement about what will happen. But it's no less frightening than the others in its implications and warnings. Some will rejoice to see him and to see that day, but for others it will be too late.

This final judgment is something like a trial, and that's what a lot of people picture when they read what the Bible says about it or when they hear the word "judgment." But it's a trial like no human being can rightly conduct, at least if it's going to be a fair one. There's no presentation of evidence, no testimony of witnesses – the judge already knows everything. There's no jury. There's no verdict – the judge already knows who's innocent or guilty. All there is, is the sentencing phase. Some will hear "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." The rest will hear, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire."

There are only those two groups of people: right side or left side, sheep or goats, blessed or cursed. There are no other choices, no other chances, no appeals to a higher court. It's obviously a very good day for the sheep, and a very bad day for the goats – the best possible or the worst possible. So the question I believe we all have to ask ourselves when reading this passage is, who are the sheep and how can we make sure we're among them? There are only two groups, no percentages of goodness, no levels or stages or fractions, no cross-breeds that are part-goat and part-sheep. So how can someone be one of these sheep? If I'm actually a goat, can a goat go about turning itself into a sheep?

I'm guessing none of you have ever seen that happen. It would be a biological miracle, for a goat to turn into a sheep, to change into an entirely different species. But it's the same as a sinner turning themselves into a saint, someone dead in sin making themselves alive again. That's what some people do try to do, though. They read this passage, and go out looking for a hungry Christ to feed, a sick Christ to visit, a stranger Christ to welcome, and so forth, so they'll be considered a sheep that day. How well do they do at it? Or rather, how good is good enough? How good do we have to be, to be counted among the sheep? What does it take to transform the sinner to a saint, the goat to a sheep?

Because we know none of us have done this perfectly. None of us have always, every time, given food and drink and clothing to the needy, visited and comforted the unfortunate. All of us

have, at some point, let an opportunity to do good slip past us. If the standard God demands is perfection, we all end up looking like goats. And so we are, all born as sinners and doomed on our own. Goats give birth to goats, and sheep give birth to sheep. A goat doesn't give birth to a sheep. That's what Jesus says in John chapter 3, "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." It would be too easy to look at this passage, conclude that it's by our good works we're saved and by failing to do them that we're condemned, and then to ultimately despair when we can never know if we've been good enough.

It's a good thing we don't read each individual passage of Scripture in a vacuum, though, that we have the entire Word and counsel of God. If this passage was all we had, I would read it and tremble, thinking of all the times I've failed and appeared to be a goat. We know that a goat can't become a sheep except by a miracle – and so a sinner, dead in sin and utterly lost, cannot become a saint, holy in the eyes of God, except by a miracle. Faith is indeed a miracle, a gracious work of God that comes from outside of ourselves.

It is God's grace that can change a goat into a sheep, that can declare a sinner to be righteous in His sight. It is Christ's merit and not our own that we can rely on when confronted with the impossible standard of perfection. Goats give birth to goats, and sheep give birth to sheep. A goat doesn't give birth to a sheep – but we remember that we have received a second birth in faith and baptism, born into the family of Christ, the Lamb of God. As the Spirit gives spiritual birth, we're taken from the family of goats and born into the family of sheep, alongside the Lamb of God.

So we turn back to Jesus' words. It's important to note that promise given to the sheep, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you," that this promise comes before any mention whatsoever of the works they have done. And there's an important phrase, too, "you who are blessed by my Father." The ones who inherit the kingdom are the ones blessed by God, the ones who have faith in Him. And in fact, they're surprised to hear about their good works! They ask, "Wait, when did we do all these things?"

They are surprised to hear about whatever they've done, perhaps because they were not relying on them, which is appropriate for someone who trusts in Christ for salvation. It's all a result of God's grace and mercy working in them, as we know He works in and through His faithful people. There's a great comment I read connected to this passage from another writer: "The kingdom of heaven has not been created according to what human righteousness deserves, but according to what God's power can prepare." Come, you who are blessed by my Father – this is all a result of His blessing.

It's the same as the verses from Ephesians I know you all had to learn in Confirmation: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." What we see in Jesus' picture today of the final judgment is the fulfillment of this. The sheep are not boasting of their good works; they have simply done the good works God prepared for them, flowing from their faith.

Now, the reason that people have to be separated at the end is that, during this life, it's often hard to tell the difference. After all, the sheep, the faithful people, still commit sins sometimes – no one's perfect. And the goats, the unfaithful, can do a lot of things that appear good on the outside. It's like a tree during winter, at least in more northerly climates than ours – when all the trees have lost

their leaves, all are entirely bare, you can't tell a healthy and living tree from one that's dead. It's only when spring comes that the difference becomes apparent – the life and the fruit in some are now visible, while others remain bare. It's the same when Christ returns and everyone's works are exposed; the living faith has borne fruit, as Jesus has said.

This brings us back to the same point as the other warnings we've received the past few weeks from Matthew chapter 25. We are set free in Christ from any worry about earning our salvation or struggling to be saved by being good enough, whatever that might mean. We know that our security is in Christ, not in ourselves. But at the same time, he warns us not to be complacent, not to be idle, but knowing who we really are, as his sheep, to live it.

In fact, one definition or way of looking at sin is "being curved in on oneself," being focused on yourself first and foremost. Just as we must look to Christ for our salvation instead of looking inward, we're better off looking outside of ourselves in many respects. Next time you're waiting for a doctor's appointment, look around the waiting room. Not long ago, I had my annual check-up: there were several people who came and went, and they were all on their phones. They'd each sit down and immediately pull out their phone – even if they were with another person, a parent or spouse. And they all had either a blank, neutral look on their face, or even a frown, as they stared down. They were literally curving in on themselves, bending and hunching over into their devices.

There were two other girls, though, who weren't on any kind of device. They were just talking to each other, nothing special or unusual; but in the time I sat there, those two girls talking to each other were the only ones in the whole office who smiled, or even showed any real signs of life. Even in such a small, unimportant example, being focused on another person instead of being wrapped up in their own little world produces an effect. And this picture of the final judgment is also a reminder to be pulled out of ourselves, to not get so wrapped up in me – the Christian calling is instead to focus on God first and foremost, then our neighbors, and on ourselves last, to see Christ in every person we encounter and treat them accordingly.

Today is the last Sunday of the church year, the Sunday sometimes called "Christ the King." This reading shows us his power and authority in the final judgment, Christ as the king of kings over all Creation. But it also shows us what his kingdom is like: even in his glory he still emphasizes the humble service and compassion that characterized his first coming. His kingdom is not like any realms or nations of this world.

So we prepare to enter the season of Advent – not just "the lead-up to Christmas," but a season of reflection and repentance that's just as much preparing ourselves for this second coming as it is remembering the first Nativity. We look to our humble carpenter king to lead us through this life until we see him face-to-face, and we hear along with all the faithful those words, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,

Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,

Born of the virgin Mary,

Suffered under Pontius Pilate,

Was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.

Prayers

C: Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.

Prayers for the Church, our community and nation, the sick, etc.

P: Eternal God, merciful Father, You have appointed Your Son as judge of the living and the dead. Enable us to wait for the day of His return with our eyes fixed on the kingdom prepared for Your own from the foundation of the world; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

C: Amen.

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: Thanks be to God!

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: Amen.