

Sunday November 23rd 2014

Readings

Ezekiel 34:11-24

11 For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. **12** As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. **13** 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 watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. **14** I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. **15** I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. **16** 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, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. **17** As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats: **18** Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet? **19** And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have fouled with your feet? **20** Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. **21** Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, **22** I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. **23** I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. **24** And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Psalm 95:1-7

1 O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! **2** Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! **3** For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. **4** In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also. **5** The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed. **6** O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! **7** For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

Ephesians 1:15-23

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason **16** I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. **17** I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, **18** so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has

called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, **19** and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.**20** God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, **21** far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. **22** And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, **23** which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Matthew 25:31-46

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, **33** and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. **34** Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **35** for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' **37** Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' **40** And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' **41** Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; **42** for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, **43** I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' **44** Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' **45** Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' **46** And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

What if I told you that Christ the King Sunday signals the end of the world? That here, in the Gospel of Matthew, we're experiencing not just a scene of judgment between livestock, but a pronouncement that the old world is passing away and the new world is coming into existence?

Now, when I say the end of the world, I don't mean the Walking Dead or World War Z, though this is an apocalyptic time. In fact, Matthew is deeply concerned with the apocalypse. Pulp fiction authors and blockbuster directors have hijacked this word

apocalypse and used it to mean some sort of terrible worldwide event that risks the destruction of earth.

Titles like “Apocalypse Now” and “Zombie

Apocalypse” lead us to think this word is about fear and destruction, about violence and war. But for Matthew, the apocalypse is all about sheep and goats.

Seriously. Because the word apocalypse actually comes from the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις “*apocálypsis*” which means something lifting the curtain, revealing something unknown, about disclosing something hidden. An apocalypse is an unveiling of a new reality. So it is the end of the world as we know it. Matthew helps us to see this in the separation of the sheep and the goats.

The iconic phrase within this imagery is, of course, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me,” as well as its converse, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” We’ve heard these time and again as a call to partnership with nonprofit groups, social ministries, and general niceties. But if we give these phrases actual credence – if we take The Word at his word – then there’s something a bit more radical going on than just a moralistic encouragement to therapeutic charity.

Recall that within the creation stories of Genesis we hear humanity is created in the image and likeness of God. Of course, sin gets in the way, and

the old world is born – that world of injustice and greed, of oppression and dehumanization, of violent nations and selfish borders – gets in the way of the image of God within us. In the old world, the image of God within humanity is clouded and shrouded sin.

But in Jesus, God does this crazy thing, and becomes fully human. What does this mean? That each part of humanity's being has been infused with the divine, like one of those fancy olive oils with citrus scents or Vanilla Coke. That God not only forgives our sins but restores the brightness the divine image within us by becoming one of us. That God breathes the Holy Spirit into our being, and the life that we live, the breath that we breathe, is no longer our own, and no longer limited by sin, but enlivened by that God who

becomes one of us. Humanity is now full to the brim with the image of God, and so we are limited only by the incomprehensible grace given by Jesus.

But of course, this also means that when we do not clothe the naked or feed the hungry or house the homeless or welcome the stranger, we are ignoring the plight of Jesus in front of us. We are seeing the suffering of God's image in front of us. Jesus identifies so closely with those in need that we cannot separate the person of Jesus and the needs of those in our society. By becoming human, Jesus took on poverty and hunger, illness and need. Every time we choose our own selfishness rather than alleviating those pains, rather than showing hospitality to all people, we scorn the presence of Jesus.

So how, then, is this all about the end of the world? Because, as Matthew tells us, the end of the present world is the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, where justice and mercy reign. In other words, as Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, Jesus restores the realm to the harmony of Eden and opens creation up to the perfection of our creator. Those committed to living with injustice cannot survive in a just world, and so the goats choose their own destiny. Those committed to selfishness cannot commit to a king whose reign arose from selflessness, and so they flee the pasture of the Good Shepherd.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the end of this world is coming to terms with the fact that our rules are, in fact, unjust, that the world in which we live

and thrive is, in fact, the one that God is bringing to an end.

This world where we've become complacent with the fact that our sisters and brothers starve is the one that God is ending. This world where we accumulate wealth on the shoulders of the poor is the one that God is ending. This world where we sleep in warm beds while others sleep on frozen concrete is the one that God is ending. This world, where we prefer our national interests rather than Christ's kingship, is the one that God is ending. All nations, from our enemies to our allies to our selves, will fade away, will become the mist that evaporate in the light of the sun.

One question we must ask on Christ the King Sunday is who is our shepherd? Do we follow as the sheep of God's pasture? Or do we meander as obstinate goats, selfishly avoiding the presence of God with those who suffer? Whose kingdom do we choose to live in?

The end of our world means the end of the perception that things belong to us. It is an apocalypse, a revelation, that we live as citizens in God's kingdom. A kingdom without borders. A kingdom without debt. A kingdom without social stratification or financial division. A kingdom where sharing goods is preferred to profit shares. A kingdom where we'd rather be good neighbors than upwardly

mobile. A kingdom where we'd rather have friends than things.

We say all this, we hear all this, as sheep in the midst of this new sanctuary, in this new pasture to which God has led us. One question we must ask as we utilize this wonderful new space is this: How does this become a beacon of the new world that God is bringing about rather than a last ditch effort to preserve the old world that is inevitably fading away?

Well, we have to share this space. Now have a flexible worship center that the entire community can use for events beyond Sunday morning. Rather than preventing others from using this gift from God, we must find ways to welcome those who need a place to meet, to stay, to feel at home. Rather than

creating divisions or borders between us, let this place become an image of God's Kingdom for all people.

We have to use this space. Emilie has talked to Radford City Schools about the potential need for an after school tutoring and care program, and the Assistant Superintendent is excited about that prospect. We're making progress with Lutheran Social Services about using this sanctuary for Across the Spectrum, a sensory worship experience for people of all abilities who have trouble finding welcome in traditional environments, beginning in January.

You see, the beauty of the apocalypse here on Christ the King Sunday is that, as God's Kingdom is revealed, we can begin to live the Kingdom life right

now. That Jesus became human and restored God's image and likeness into our lives means that we no longer remain bound by the old world of sin and injustice. We can begin to live like the apocalypse has already happened. We can anticipate the apocalypse and live as though the new world is already here.

Because, you see, Christ planted the seed of God's Kingdom in humanity with his life, death, and resurrection. The apocalypse began in the manger and continued on the Cross. Though we don't know the day or the hour when God this final revelation will occur, we do know that Christ brought this new world to us in a manger. So here on Christ the King Sunday, we look toward Bethlehem for what kind of Kingdom

Christ brings. We look to Advent to remind us that Christ's kingdom comes to change the entire world so that justice and mercy reign. We look to serve others, to welcome others, because Jesus is always in the midst of others. Amen.