

We are approaching what we have called, “the holidays.” I am not sure what to call it this year, because it is a real challenge to attempt anything close to the “holidays” of the past- the usual gatherings, special worship services and traditions.

However, in the Church Year some things are certain, we can be confident that this Sunday just before Advent begins is Christ the King Sunday- it represents the end of the liturgical church year. Next week is the beginning of a new lectionary year. We can be confident that during this time between Christ the King Sunday and a New Year of 2021, we will celebrate Thanksgiving, four weeks of Advent, Christmas and then the secular New Year as well. Next week, as we begin that new church year, we will mark the first Sunday of Advent by lighting that first candle on the Advent wreath, celebrating Communion as part of worship and begin to prepare our hearts to walk these weeks to Advent. During this time, we will be emphasizing the importance of being reminded of the reason for Christmas- God’s love that brought Jesus Christ to earth. In spite of the changes that will be necessary to make in this “holiday” season of 2020, it occurs to me that having been forced to make priority choices for the past number of months, we have- in a way- been forced to truly slow down enough to remember the true meaning of Christmas and the true priorities in our lives. One of those priorities we often hear is that we must take care to protect those we love- wearing masks, social distancing, etc.- we take care to protect them and ourselves so we will be able to hug them close when this is all over.

At the end of the year- church or otherwise- it is natural to reflect on the past weeks and months. We hear or review annual reports, reflect on success or nonsuccess, basically analyze how things currently stand and then set new goals or dreams for the upcoming year. The polls say it is not very good for the American religion. Polls report that the NONES (those who are not connected with a church)-the NONES-are the fastest growing segment of the American population. However, a 2018 Pew Research Center poll reveals that 92% of the American public believe in a higher power. Christ the King Sunday, focusing on Christ’s being above and far beyond the material part of our lives, may resonate with these sentiments. The one Christians call Christ is the name of that higher power. Famed 20th century Reformed theologian Karl Barth expresses this well, claiming that Christ and the church are “the goal and end of all the ways of God.”

On this final Sunday following Pentecost in the church year, we look to Ezekiel and Matthew as they both address what kind of reign we can expect from Christ. The verses prior to our Ezekiel 34 scripture, speak as an indictment of the “shepherds of Israel”- the leadership of the day. Two basic charges are leveled against them. First, the shepherds looked upon the sheep

(the people) primarily as a source for satisfying their own desires. Secondly, the shepherds have not cared for the sheep (the people), and consequently the flock has suffered at their hands and ultimately been scattered.

Writing from Babylon, Ezekiel has experienced the fall of Judah and deportation to Babylon. Ezekiel is under the thumb of a very different kind of kingship- the rule of an authoritarian, conquering king who consumes the weak and those unable to defend themselves. The book of Ezekiel both warns against judgment and gives assurance of salvation. This makes his vision of God's leadership and reign all the more significant. In verse 4 of this 34th chapter we find the "judgement" words which are quite similar to the Matthew 25 scripture- "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost...." But as this morning's scripture- verse 11 begins, we find the "assurance of salvation" words- the Lord God, promises that the lost will be found, the weak tended, the injured bandaged, the lean fed. The fat or the ones who grew big and strong by unjustly feeding off the weak, will receive their just rewards. These images are vital ways of showing what kind of leader God chooses to be, and what we can expect the reign of Christ to be like. There is judgment for some and assurance of salvation for others- the difference based on previous actions.

The Matthew 25 scripture for this morning is often called the Judgment Scene. Today's scripture is the last passage before the beginning of Matthew's account of the Passion story...in other words, Matthew presents it as Jesus' final teaching before the Passover and the days leading up to Jesus' death.

In this passage, we find one of the few times Jesus speaks of "when the Son of Man comes in his glory" or what we may call the "End times" or "Second Coming." But in the Matthew scripture when this comes, he will gather all nations before him and separate them as a shepherd separates sheep from the goats.

"Separating the sheep from the goats" has always confused me- sheep and goats look nothing alike in my mind so separating should not be difficult! However, research found that the breed of the sheep and the breed of the goat make a world of difference. There are indeed goats with an abundance of wool- looks like my image of sheep- and there are sheep with the shorter, coarser hair that makes them look more like my idea of a goat. One significant difference, however, is sheep follow the shepherd, while goats typically do what they wish.

This last significance then gives the reason why the Son of Man- in the final coming, puts the sheep on the right and blesses them- since they hear and respond to the shepherd's voice. The goats are put on the left- those that "march to their own drum" and are cast into the eternal fire.

Two things seem to be clear....First, Christ (Son of Man) is the one who passes judgment on humanity and second, that the judgment is based on treatment of others. Christ passes judgment and judgment is based on how we treat others. What is equally important, however, is that those who are being judged have no idea that they have encountered Christ. They are utterly dumbfounded, "Ah, excuse me, Lord. When did we see you in need?" Even the righteous are surprised that they had done the good deeds Christ attributes to them.

Maybe the point is that those who follow the master's voice do it unconsciously. The inescapable conclusion is that righteous behavior is certainly not done for the sake of the reward or personal gain it brings! It is not an effort to gain reward and avoid eternal punishment. The reward is offered as a result of behavior that arises instinctively from within us- behavior that becomes natural for us- behavior that comes from being close to God. All scheming and planning to do good deeds **FOR THE SAKE OF REWARD** are rendered impossible.

The connection between Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25 seems obvious. However, the Ezekiel reading holds the promise that even when leadership fails, God, as the good shepherd, steps in to search, rescue, gather, feed, seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, strengthen the weak while destroying the fat and those who see themselves as strong. The fact that God will step in to care for the sheep because of the failure on the part of the leadership of the day, seems to hold a warning to leaders today- both within and without the church. In addition to the warning, the promise also seems to be clear that God will watch over the faithful no matter what- a precious promise in these unsettled times.

This Sunday before Thanksgiving is a good time to ask ourselves if we are remembering Christ's command to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison. It feels like the times in which we currently live, give us an abundance of opportunity to open our hearts and hands for others. This is a time for giving thanks and showing proof of our true thanks by our actions. The scripture texts both point to the future, to what God will do. What is striking about the texts is the poor and the weak are not being bashed or reprimanded. In fact, God indicates that the divine plan is to protect them and have God's people care for them. This is not the way most contemporary Americans view poverty. The mentality of our country along with the pandemic with which we are faced, has multiplied beyond belief, anxiety and extreme poverty. In the richest, most advanced country in the world, we find ourselves faced with desperate times. A desperateness that seems so extreme, we are in danger of accepting it as "normal" and go on with our own little world one day at a time.

The Biblical texts from Ezekiel 34 and Matthew 25 stand in sharp contrast to such an attitude. Our God maintained concern for those who were struggling and came to their rescue in the midst of the exile in Babylon. Our God challenges us in Matthew to keep eyes of love wide

open to the struggles of those around us- whether those struggles are material or emotional or spiritual. In our constant efforts to keep close to God, we likely will find our hearts give us no choice but to reach out to relieve the difficulties being experienced by those around us. At Thanksgiving, we can be reminded that as the poor are not to be blamed for their poverty, so our economic well-being- at whatever it is- is not something we have earned, but is a gift for which we give thanks. We are to be reminded of Jesus' words, "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."

This week I read the following, "God isn't asking you to figure it out. God is asking you to trust that God already has." Trusting fully that God has it all figured out, may we walk closely with God in these weeks, increasingly aware God's love is beyond imagination and fully confident that God protects the faithful. As we walk surrounded by the blessedness of God's love, may our lives reflect that joy in our open arms of concern toward others as we prepare for Advent. Amen

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