

Psalm 95:1-7a
Matthew 25:31-46

Christ the King Sunday, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
November 26, 2017

Surprise, Surprise!

Introduction to the Psalm

Our psalm today is found in a grouping of Psalms that focus on the reign of God—so-called “enthronement psalms,” quite appropriate for this Christ the King Sunday. God is our creator and sustainer, the rock of our salvation, worthy of our worship and obedience. Listen to these words from Psalm 95:1-7a...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson for today we find Jesus sharing a story about the Final Day of Judgment. It’s like a shepherd separating the sheep from the goats. And the story has a surprise ending. Listen to these words from Matthew 25:31-46...

Sermon

The holiday season has begun. And yes, the stores have promoted it since before Halloween. Now Thanksgiving and Black Friday have come and gone. This time of year there is much that calls for our attention: decorations, cards, family gatherings, trips, holiday parties, gifts to buy and wrap, special worship services, gifts of charity to give before year’s end.

On the church calendar today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year. Next Sunday is the First Sunday of Advent. And today is known as Christ the King Sunday, serving as a reminder that the One to be born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king is in fact the true King of heaven and earth. Wise men from the East will journey many miles to greet this newborn Light of the World. And we sing, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come; Let earth receive her King.”

So into this holiday season comes Christ the King Sunday that centers around the crucified and risen Christ who reigns in glory for all eternity. The Alpha and Omega, the One to whom Christians owe ultimate allegiance.

Many people make an appointment to see doctor at least once a year for a complete physical to measure their wellness. Such an exam is not an entirely comfortable experience. But the insurance company thinks highly of it and is willing to pay the bill. If the LDL cholesterol level is up, we know to cut out the cookies and increase the exercise. If a suspicious lump is found, a biopsy may be ordered. If the blood pressure is up we may need to pay more attention to our diet, our exercise, and our stress; medication may be prescribed.

Well, Matthew's depiction of the last judgment is like a wellness check. It can provide a reading of our spiritual health that can lead to certain changes in our lives. As our doctor wants us to be healthy, the Great Physician wants us to be spiritually fit.

In our Gospel Lesson we have Jesus sharing a story of the coming Day of Judgment. But the ending comes as a surprise to the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees—the religious leaders of the day, and also a surprise to the followers of Jesus.

Now the news that Christ is coming to judge the nations should not take any of us by surprise. For the New Testament states this conviction again and again. In fact, prior to our lesson today, we have three parables where the householder, the bridegroom, and the master of the servants, after some delay, return with a reckoning for those who are left behind. In our passage for today the Shepherd-King-Judge, has already returned.

To believe in such judgment is to affirm that God has standards, that not “anything goes,” and that there are consequences for our behavior. As God's primary standards were revealed by Christ, they will also be applied by Christ.

That said, such judgment means separation—the goats from the sheep, just as the sheep were separated from the goats when it came time to shear the sheep. Separation is not an entirely easy or pleasant thought, but nonetheless part of the biblical vision. Truth is, not all of our behavior has a place in the kingdom of God. So God brings about a separation that purifies, that winnows (like the separation of the wheat from the chaff), that establishes the right and dismisses the wrong.

But here in Matthew 25 we find a startling standard for such separation. Surprise, surprise! We don't hear anything about orthodox beliefs, being born again, or our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. There's nothing about baptism or any other sacrament. Prayer and fasting are not mentioned. Being regular in worship is not on the list. This is not to say that those matters are unimportant; but it is a reminder that personal piety is not all that Christ calls for and expects of us.

Robertson Nicol tells of his father, a country minister, who had a passion for books. He had collected over 17,000 volumes, which overflowed everything in his manse. But his young wife died after eight years of married life in which she may well have been starved to death so that her husband could feed on knowledge. The children were neglected and Robertson Nicol wrote afterwards, "I always feel that I was defrauded in my youth—there was so little sunshine in it—far too little." Here was a man who was a scholar, who could have scored well in any theological examination. But few will dare to say that he brought to God an adequate substitute for the neglect of his family.

So, on what basis then do we hear of judgment and separation? According to our lesson, Christ judges the peoples of all the nations on whether they did or whether they did not give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, hospitality to the stranger, clothing to the naked, care to the sick, and comfort to those in prison.

The famous missionary Mabel Shaw says that when she was telling her little Bantu children in Africa about giving a cup of water in the name of the Chief, as they had learned to call Jesus, they were tremendously interested, because in a hot country a cup of cold water can be priceless. Not long afterwards, Shaw was sitting on the verandah, when up the village street came a string of porters. Exhausted, they sank down wearily at the side of the road. These men were from another tribe; that could be seen from their clothes and from the way they wore their hair. And there was often suspicion and hostility between the tribes.

But then something happened. Out from the verandah came a line of the primary-age children. Each had a water pot on their head. They were obviously a little frightened but just as determined to see this thing through. They went out to the tired porters, knelt before them, and held up their water pots, saying, "We are the Chief's children, and we offer you a drink." The astonished porters knelt in return, took the water and drank, and the little ones went running back to Mabel Shaw, telling her, "We have given a thirsty man a drink in the name of the Chief." In an ordinary village if these men had asked for a drink, they would have been told, "You are not of our village; get water for yourself." It was Christianity which bridged the gulf. And it is clear that the simple act of the Bantu children would do more to make Christianity real to these porters than any number of sermons. Actions *can* speak louder than words.

One of the interesting elements of the story of the sheep and the goats is that both are surprised. The sheep have served Christ without knowing it, and the goats have known Christ without serving him. But "when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food?" Christ has the ability to judge those who have never known him. And for those who have known him, lip service is not enough. Or as James would say, "Faith without works is dead." (James 2:17)

Jesus says that when we care for the least of these, we're caring for him. When we help someone in need, we're helping Christ. William Barclay tells of an old legend about the soldier saint Martin of Tours, whose shrine in France became a famous stopping-point for pilgrims on the road to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Martin was conscripted into the Roman army at the age of 15. It is said that one cold winter day he was entering a city when a beggar asked him for alms. Martin had nothing to give him. But the beggar was blue with cold, so Martin took off his old battered soldier's cloak, cut it in two with his military sword, and gave half to the beggar, who blessed him and was gone.

Well, that night Martin had a dream. In it he saw heaven and all the hosts of heaven. And Jesus was there, wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels came to him and said, "Master, why are you wearing that old cloak?" And Jesus answered, "My servant Martin gave it to me."

The L.O.T. project is one of the charities that we support at Midway. L-O-T stands for the "Least of These." This ministry here in Anderson seeks to bring Jesus, the Hope of the World, to those in need of food and clothing. It's just one way we honor this teaching of our Lord in Matthew 25. As we enter the season of giving and receiving, let us not forget the Least of These.

Finally, in verse 34 Jesus says the blessed ones are those who care for those in need. And we might add that we know God's blessing when we affirm that we have a King who is not like the kings of this world. We are blessed because we know a King who brings real peace, who sees the needy, and who hears the cries of the oppressed. In God's kingdom, no one is hungry, naked, sick, or alone. To bear witness to Christ as King is to be a messenger of this kingdom—to serve others and thereby profess the presence and the coming of God's glorious reign.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.