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Sermon for All Saints-by-the-Sea
Sunday, Nov. 23, 2014

**Readings: Proper 29 – Christ the King - Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1:15-23;
Matthew 25:31-46**

Believe it or not, we are on the brink of saying *Happy New Year!* Really. You're probably thinking, "*Not by my calendar!*" or "*Did she leave her mind in France?*" Actually, we'd both be right. According to our church calendar, we have reached the last Sunday of the year and according to our secular calendar we have a ways to go until Jan. 1. To put it another way, we begin the new church year with the season of Advent, which begins on Nov. 30, and continues until Christmas. It is supposed to be a spiritual time of reflection and quiet preparation for the birth of Jesus. By secular calendar standards, we are about to embark not on a New Year, but on a New Christmas shopping frenzy mixed in with holiday preparation madness. So, as we bid adieu to this church year, let's pray that we can greet Advent with peace of mind after we venture through this final week packed with Thanksgiving, football, and Black Friday

It is hard to believe that another liturgical year has passed so quickly! We have arrived at this final Sunday of Year A within our three year cycle of Lectionary readings. It culminates with our looking to Christ as Christ the King. Our scripture readings throughout the year have brought us to the realization that all aspects of his earthly life have come together to reveal him as King, ruler of God's kingdom, the kingdom that spells out goodness and mercy and eternal salvation for all who believe. Today's gospel reading from Matthew captures the dramatic scene of the Last Judgment in the final and climatic passage of Jesus' discourse on the

end times. It actually provides the only detailed depiction of the Last Judgment in the New Testament. This dramatic scene follows a series of exhortations and parables given by Jesus to teach his followers what constitutes proper behavior as they await his return in glory.

As you may recall, for centuries before Jesus, devout Jews had awaited the messiah, the anointed one by God in the form of a king, who would expel foreign rulers from their nation and restore Jewish rule. They had come to hate the corrupt and barbaric Roman Empire and their hatred only inflamed this messianic hope. Over time, different leaders had risen up, claiming to be the Messiah. They amassed followers, led armed revolts, and had been ruthlessly put down. During the great pilgrimage festivals of the year, such as Passover, the population in Jerusalem would swell to several times its normal size, and the city would seethe with anti-Roman sentiment. It was into this atmosphere before a fateful Passover that Jesus rode into the city on a donkey. Such an entrance was expected of a Messiah. Hopeful crowds met Jesus waving palm branches, a symbol of Jewish nationalism, shouting, *“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord...Blessed is the King of Israel!”*

Our passage opens with a vivid description of the Son of Man’s coming in glory, accompanied by angels, seated on his throne. The nations are then gathered before him and separated into two groups. Jesus is portrayed in his glorious return as a shepherd, an image Matthew repeatedly employed in his gospel. In Palestine at this time, shepherds routinely had mixed flocks. At night, they separated the sheep from the goats. Sheep enjoyed the open air of the pasture, while goats had to be protected from the cold. Because sheep had more commercial value, they were preferred over goats. Now we see the glorious son of Man as shepherd

separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep are placed at his right hand and the goats are placed at his left.

The picture of the Son of Man as shepherd then morphs into the image of Jesus as king. As the king invested with God's power to execute judgment, the Son of Man pronounces his verdicts. He declares the sheep as *blessed* by God and invites them to inherit the fullness of the kingdom. They are blessed because they fed the king when he was hungry, gave him drink when he was thirsty, welcomed him when he was a stranger, clothed him when he was naked, cared for him when he was sick, and visited him when he was imprisoned. The first five of these actions were typical Jewish works of mercy. The sheep are perplexed because they cannot recall ministering to the king in his need. He then reveals to them that they did so whenever they were merciful "*to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters.*"

Next, the king declares the goats *accursed* and consigns them to eternal fire. They are accursed because they did not feed, give drink to, welcome, clothe, or visit him in his time of need. Like the sheep, the goats are confounded: when did they fail to serve the king? Jesus responds that their lack of merciful care for "*the least of these*" was neglect of him. Thus the goats will go to eternal punishment, while the sheep, now called "*the righteous*" will enter into eternal life.

What message are we supposed to take away from this passage? What is the underlying meaning of such judgment and consequences to come?

One of the most important things to keep in mind is that the God of Jesus, the God of the Bible, is not a remote supreme being on a throne above the clouds or in some mysterious outreach of the universe. Jesus is saying that God is here, among us, in the messiness of human life. God is here, in your neighbor, the one who needs you. If you want to see God, look into the face of one of the least of these, the vulnerable, the weak, and the children.

Next, be aware of the practice of religion in the world. How often is it used to commit wrongful doings, violence and self-serving? Atrocities committed in the name of God, cover ups for clergy abuse, sacraments denied over disagreement, mutual condemnation by religious leaders, energy and resources wasted over endless fighting of issues of tolerance or doctrinal formulas – this is not the language of Jesus. Jesus did not speak of ecclesiastical connections or religious practices in this passage. There is not a word in it about theology, creeds, or orthodoxies. What Jesus demands to know is if you saw God in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name.

Finally, God not only wants a new world modeled on the values of Jesus, he wants each one of us. God is a God of love who wants to save us and redeem us with the gift of life – true, deep, authentic human life. He wants to touch our hearts with love and wants to save us by persuading us to care and see other human beings who need us. He wants us never to forget the needs of others. He wants us to understand Jesus' words that he, "*came not to be served but to serve.*" This is the way his followers are to love and serve him as they wait for his glorious return. Jesus teaches that God's reign – the full revelation of which we await – is characterized

in the present, not by powerful works and miracles, but by deeds of love, mercy, and compassion, especially toward those most in need. A true king is a shepherd.

This coming week we have two specific occasions to assess how we are responding to Jesus, our king and shepherd – Thanksgiving and the beginning of Advent. Thanksgiving gives us a wonderful opportunity to express our thanks for all the blessings we have received this past year during our joy and during our sorrow. The beginning of Advent gives us the opportunity to review our lives this past year and assess our Christian commitment in preparation for Christ’s birth. It is a time set aside for seeking God’s counsel on how to draw closer to him and live out the example Jesus set before us: Are we authentic to our Christian claims? Do we stand behind our beliefs and live them out accordingly, or do we cave in pressing situations, side-stepping issues or actions to stay in our comfort zone? Do we miss opportunities of goodness and mercy, seeing God in *“the least of these”* because we don’t want to spend the energy, or worse, because we simply can’t be bothered? Is that what we want to answer to before Jesus, Christ the King, when we have that end conversation? “Oh sorry Jesus, I was just so busy and I just didn’t want to ruffle any feathers, you know, in the spirit of loving my neighbor....”

On this Sunday when the church proclaims Christ the King, it bows only to Jesus the Christ. The church declares that it does not give allegiance to any other person, principality, or power claiming to be sovereign. Will you join in that proclamation? Will you allow Christ to be the ruler of your life? What a wonderful option to contemplate as we approach the beginning of Advent and a new church year. Will you allow Christ to be the ruler of your life?

Amen.